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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### WHAT'S UP ON FACEBOOK

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#### ABSTRACT

The following research investigates the identity negotiations in the life of a Facebook user. The important research question is 'how' a young active Facebook user alters or extends his circle of significant other. With respect to the data collected and analyzed, it was interesting to observe that the process of significance developed between the user and his significant other is primarily due to Facebook chat. Facebook "events" and "messages" were extensively used for effective computer mediated communication. The results showed that there was a clear gender related differences with respect to reasons of high social activities on Facebook. These findings were later correlated with NEO-PI-R personality test.

#### INTRODUCTION

Hangouts', 'Twitter', 'Instagram', 'What's app', and 'Facebook' aptly describe the normal life activities of a young person living in these modern techno savvy era. Marshall McLuhan in the year 1967 had rightly predicted the impact of internet in today's age and had invented the oxymoron 'global village'. So it is not uncommon, to see Hangouts replacing face to face communication, Facebook displacing personal diaries and twitter being the new newspaper of Generation Y. In the modern age of science and technology the role of Social networking sites (SNS's) as a medium of communication is an important area of interest for many researchers and academicians. Research suggests SNS's have a much deeper meaning for this generation Y than the rest of society (Boyd, 2008; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008 as seen in Farquhar, 2009 Identity Negotiation on Facebook.com). The term "significant other" was coined by Harry Stack Sullivan, who identified significant others as those who directly socialize the person to whom they are significant. Significant other implies a person whom one looks up to for affirmation or negation. It is assumed that the online activity of an individual varies based on 'age' and 'phase of life'. Sullivan (1940) and George Herbert Mead (1967) suggest that socialization relies upon a person's considering the other's view of himself or herself as important. The researcher aimed to understand identity negotiations taking place in the life of an active Facebook user when he/ she had an online significant other (The online activity of people who are friended on Facebook).

Significant others are those persons who are of sufficient importance in an individual's life to affect the individual's emotions, behavior, and sense of self. To understand the aim more comprehensively, it is important to understand the concept of identity. Identity is developed by the individual, but it has to be recognized and confirmed by others. Adolescence is thus also a period in which young people negotiate their separation from their family, and develop independent social competence (Buckingham, 2008 as seen in Introducing Identity). The underlying assumption for this study was that an online identity and online social behavior of a seventeen-year-old teenager would be different from a twenty eight year old professional.

#### Background Literature

The effect of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on the nature of interpersonal relationships has been an intensively researched topic in the academic discipline of communication studies. Boyd (2004, 2008) analyzed the role SNS's play in the daily lives of teenagers. Turkle (1995, 2004) analyzed how technology shapes the individual's sense of self. Hodgkinson (2006) and others examined how subcultures can thrive online even when non-normative behaviors thereof are continually rebuked in daily interactions. In all these cases, the daily life aspect of an individual with the technology is crucial. One does not have two separate lives i.e. offline online (technology based identity). Rather, there exists a good mix of interaction-types (Altheide, 1999; Boyd, 2004). A study on the offline and online behavior of Facebook users will help understand this mixed identity.

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Frazzled By Facebook (2010) states that women generally use language skills to their advantage in online social interactions. Suresh Kalyani (April, 2013) emphasizes about Gratifications theory suggesting that people have different socio-psychological traits, which may affect the behavior and underlying reasons for using social networking sites. The researcher has reviewed the book Alone Together by Sherry Turkle (2011) which has been useful in understanding CMC. Several important points regarding presentation of oneself on social networks (p.153), the opportunity for individual social experimentation but the challenges of escaping the demand of a new social group (p.174) from this book were useful for this research. The book also illustrated the differences between real and Facebook friends (p.182).

There has been a vast amount of studies related to the evolution and usage of Facebook and social media, but there exists a notable scarcity in studies, which analyzes the underlying psychological traits of a social media user. There has been little consensus on the specific characteristics and their corresponding correlation between real and an online identity of the same person. Hence, the differences between multiple identities i.e. real and online identity are very blurred and interrelated. 'Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use' in the journal of Computers in Human Behavior authored by Craig Ross *et al.* (2009) discusses about usage of a personality test for Facebook users. Costa and McCrae (1992a, 1992b) specifically created the NEO Personality Inventory –Revised (NEO-PI-R) to assess the five factors that have appeared consistently throughout the personality assessment literature. The present study conducted a similar test to find the relation between the offline (real) personality of a user and his online activity.

Social Presence theory (Joseph B. Walther 2011) and some other related theories helped the researcher to understand and characterize the online behavior of users. The importance of verbal and non-verbal cues, gestures in the communication process is also taken into consideration.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research question here was 'How does SNS extend or alter the circle of significant others in identity negotiations'. The research was inductive in nature therefore qualitative approach was vital. Firstly, the researcher conducted an online survey as a preliminary method to procure data about the respondents. In order to get the amusing and amazing stories, the one-to-one interview was the best technique and was preferred over focussed group discussion.

In-depth Interviews was the research tool used in this study. Fig 1 details the important areas of focus of this study,

Analyzing	Personality Traits on Facebook
Understanding Development	Changing Identity with evolution of Technology
Usage	Online friendships
Facebook	Age and gender differences
	Features and perceived purposes

**Fig. 1. The focus areas of the researcher**

**Sampling Issue**

The above research demanded qualitative treatment. Non-probability sampling was used by the researcher. Purposive Sampling technique was used in this study. The respondents were selected based on certain parameters, which are mentioned in Fig 2.

1	Average Usage/week	5hours
2	Minimum Friends	300
3	Befriended strangers	Yes
4	Age group 1	17-22
5	Age group 2	23-28
6	Access to Facebook	Multiple1

**Figure 2: Selection criteria for Respondents**

There were equal number of boys and girls selected for each age group. All the respondents, national and international had been residents of Pune at some point of their educational life.

**RESULTS**

After analyzing the profile, interviews and data of the respondents, the researcher identified the important offline connections on Facebook were mainly immediate family members, siblings and relatives. Notable exceptions were consideration of school, society friends as important connections. Most of the respondents expected 'likes', 'comments' from these important people as their inputs, appreciation and opinions mattered For ease of understanding, the results have been discussed in the following parts,

**Online Privacy settings of users**

The respondents from the group one were prudent about the things they posted online. Girls generally had "restricted" profile, whereas for the same age group boys had a more open to all type of profile settings. Hence, it was inferred from the online behavior, that males have a high degree of extraversion as compared to females.

**Perceived Usage of Facebook in general**

Unanimously boys perceived Facebook as an excellent networking tool, while comparatively girls had their own set of doubts and preconceived notions to work with an online friend. These two different results can be related to NEO-PI-R test, which revealed females had high degree of neuroticism as compared to males.

**Usage of Facebook Chat**

Most of the respondents did not use messages as an option to initiate friendships online. Girls had customized their chat settings to have conversations only with set of selected people, while boys usually had their chat window ON to make their presence felt. This can be related to high degree of agreeableness in females.

**Reasons for Be-friending strangers**

Girls added strangers on the recommendation of their friends, or some emotional connect. This type of online behavior towards strangers was not observed with boys. Befriending strangers was not a big issue with boys.

Notably one of the male respondents even said, "It is good to know about new people, their interests and connect with them".

### Thoughts after meeting significant other

Some of the respondents had preconceived notions before meeting their significant others. Users had created a mental image of their new friends based on the online activity and profile. The experiences shared by respondents regarding the first real physical meeting with their new online friends were mainly either positive or total disbelief. This feeling was mainly due to the similarities and differences between the online and offline personalities of the new friend.

### Importance/Value of a Facebook Stranger

Different human aspects made a person significant to the user. Some users considered nature, trust, transparency as qualities, which qualified a person to be significant. Some felt appreciation about each other's work, mutual interests were important. A male respondent said, "For me generally girls become significant".

### Identity representation of significant other

It was observed that events and personal chats were among the top rated features of Facebook. Female significant others mostly had original photographs, which suggested that women were ready to socialize largely on a virtual platform. Males had some inspiring quotes as their status.

### Point of Connect

Mutual interests, authenticity, value for the person, interesting status updates were some of the common points of connect as reported by the users. It was fascinating to understand that relationships, which were started with chatting, are regarded as important ones in offline world now.

### Inferences

The present study observed that Facebook as a SNS was used for 'Social browsing' and 'Social Searching'. Online SNS may also serve for 'social searching' - finding out information about offline contacts and 'social browsing' - the use of the site to develop new connections, sometimes with the aim of offline interaction (Lampe *et al.*, 2006 as seen in Joinson, 2007). The study suggested that users expected appreciation from these people. These online contacts were the ones a user generally looked up for negation and affirmation. The Social Enhancement hypothesis stated that those who perceive their offline social networks as well developed seek to enhance them by developing more extensive online social networks (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2005; See also Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Kraut *et al.*, 2002; Walther, 1996 as seen in Zywicki, and Danowski, 2008). The online activity of both the groups varied as group one from 17-22 had more friends as compared to the second group i.e. 23 to 28. 'age' and 'phase of life' defined the online activity of the older respondents. Whereas reaching out to 'maximum people' and 'continuous online presence' were important of the younger ones. Friendship is a flexible notion;

peripheral friendships can grow into closer friendships on Facebook, which is a practical facilitator for friendships (Boyd, 2006 as seen in Barkhuus, 2010).

Facebook user's developed rapport with their significant others after several meetings and extensive late night chats. Some users found a family member in his significant other, while others had connected on mutual interests.

## DISCUSSION

The researcher has relied on the intensive interviews for data collection. This method of intensive interviews has its own typical advantages and limitations. Overdependence on the interviewer for truthful answers and sometimes the interviewer uses the interview as an opportunity to vent everything that is wrong with the topic, putting the researcher on the defensive and hence the researcher has to sift through their remarks for constructive criticisms. However, the researcher has refrained from bringing any personal objectivity and biases. This work underlines the need for understanding and more inclusion of offline identities in the new social world. The need for interdisciplinary (communication studies, psychology and computer sciences) multi dimensional approach required for dealing with problems related to social media has been. This study can be used further along with a detailed content analysis of Facebook in order to model the perfect online behavior. An ethnography study understanding the user's online behavior thereby understanding the identity negotiations will also be a promising approach.

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