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Facebook's Self-Presentation Strategies: A Socio-Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines self-presentation on Facebook by Gombe State University (GSU) students. It investigates how these students create the kind of impression that they want their audience to form about them whenever they view their Facebook group profiles. Although there are a number of works that focuses on analyzing the discourse on Facebook, little attention has been paid to the analysis of Facebook profile, particularly student's self-presentation strategies on Facebook. It is to this effect that this work sets out to uncover different strategies of self-presentation on Facebook by GSU students. The work draws on Goffman's concept of facework, and Brown and Levinson's face and politeness theory for its analysis. The data were sourced through random selection of 20 Facebook group profiles. Three methods of data collection were used: participant observation, photo-elicitation and interviewing the administrators. The study found out that there are different self-presentation strategies used on Facebook but the ones prominent among the undergraduates studied are solidarity, social, adventure, humour and explanation strategies. The study concludes that these strategies exhibited by students on Facebook are key elements in understanding undergraduate students' culture and reflect their desire to achieve positive self-presentation and image management.

Keywords: Self-presentation Strategies, Facebook, Face Work, Facebook Profiles

Introduction

In the last few years, the rise of information technology has had far-reaching cultural and social impact on people and the development of the internet has played a major role in this technological revolution. This revolution has contributed to the fundamental change in the way people communicate. Thus, internet technologies have transformed conventional communicative practices by allowing the emergent of new forms of communicative, cultural, expressive and social activities (Drago, 2006). Among these new communicative tools, social network sites have been very popular amongst the youths and spending time on social network sites appear to be part of young adults' daily activities.

Social media have traditionally transformed the nature of modern communication and introduced ways of interaction which are, according to Crystal (2001, p. 76), “fundamentally different from those found in the other semiotic situations”. In similar light, Wodak (2011) states that “we no longer communicate only in traditional written and spoken genres, but also using the new ones” (p. 27). Digital technology has provided new channels for interaction, new ways of making meaning and new modes of communication and interaction known as 'social media' (Anderson, 2006, p. 26). This phenomenon deserves a socio-pragmatic analysis which will help to reveal the different discursive features, communicative practices and genres that are prevalent among social media users, specifically, Facebook users.

Facebook is viewed by many scholars as an online speech community where identities are created through one's own profile and in interaction with others (see Bodomo, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ip & Wagner, 2008; Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Anderson, 2006, and Acquisti & Gross, 2006). Wilson and Peterson (2002) are explicit when they state that the nature of communication in online communities differs from traditional communities because an online community is not based on face-to-face communication or on a shared location and history but its members have different roles, share similar purpose or interest, and assume and follow lay down rules in their interactions.

The notion that facebook is an online speech community where identities are constructed and the members are guided by lay down rules and common interest (Anderson, 2006) describes, to a large extent, the concerns of socio-pragmatics. Socio-pragmatics is a term identified by Leech (1983) as the study of the ways in which pragmatic meanings reflect specific local condition on language use. It is a subfield of pragmatics that considers the social rules of interaction and those expectations about interactional discourse upheld by members of a speech community as appropriate and normal behaviors (LaCastro, 2012; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Since Facebook is a speech community, it is, therefore, necessary to extend our interest and analysis to other social behaviors that are peculiar to interactants in this particular community. This is achieved through a self-presentation framework that explicitly embraces a wide range of identifiable strategies employed by the members of this speech community as normal behavior (Tracy, 1990). More so, in investigating this type of phenomenon, one linguistic approach will not be comprehensive enough since the language is produced by individuals of different identities and communicative habits. Therefore, this paper is situated within socio-pragmatics and adopts self-presentation model as postulated by Goffman (1959) and improved upon by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their Face and Politeness theory. The study aims to reveal the different discursive features and communicative practices on the profile pages of the students' Facebook group forums that serve as strategies for self–presentation. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. identify the various facework strategies employed by these students in presenting their 'selves' on Facebook,
- ii. examine how these strategies are construed, and
- iii. how this knowledge provides insights into the communicative habits of the students in the speech community.

Self-presentation Strategies on Facebook

There are various kinds of self-presentation strategies on social media. Leary

(1996), in his review, *The Need to Belong, Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, introduces several self-presentation strategies in everyday life. He examined self-presentation strategies used among teenage girls in their face-to-face interaction. The study discovers that self-descriptions, attitude statements, nonverbal behaviors, social associations, conformity, compliance, aggression and risk-taking are the strategies employed by the teenagers in direct and self-presentation which aimed at conveying impressions of self-confidence and competence as a way of repairing a loss or a threatened face.

Similarly, Wong (2012) conducted a study on students' Facebook profiles to explore personality and impression they form online. Adopting Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face and Politeness theory, they found out that the students tend to show positive face presentation which is interpreted in general as emotionally stable and open to new experiences. This, they disclose, is a reaction to the threatened face acts they have encountered or experienced. These students are aware of their own efforts to ensure that their profiles created good impressions to the audience. Hence, there was a close relationship between facework strategies employed by the students and the audience that viewed the profiles which aid in conveying the desired image online.

To elaborate this, Dominick (1999) carried out a study of personal homepages on the World Wide Web. The study analysed 319 personal home pages and identified their most popular features as channels of self-presentation. He reported that facebook users present their 'selves' and manage their impression by adjusting their profiles to give descriptions of not who they really are but who they want to be. They also join groups so as to press home the positive face they portray and the negative face they want their audience to avoid impeding on. The study found that the users employed strategies such as acceptance, denial and apology as self-presentation and, in return, the audiences were tactful and discrete. The results are consistent with the strategies outlined by Goffman (1959) and Brown and Levinson (1987) in their facework theory.

Similarly, Pan et al. (2017) investigated the use of instagram for self-presentation among celebrities in Thailand. Their study revealed that the celebrities used instagram as an avenue to display their lives' stories and lifestyle which is self-presentation by nature. The findings reported that there are two purposes for the celebrities' use of Instagram; (1) they use instagram as an impression management strategy; (2) they use instagram to present an ideal rather than their authentic selves and, (3) they use instagram for self-promotion and brand endorsement. The study concludes by asserting that celebrities' public displays help them promote themselves as well as the products they want to sell to their fans and the public.

Self-presentation on Facebook affords undergraduates the opportunity to think about what they prefer to show others through their posts, emphasizing aspect of their personalities or share photos that convey the best images of them in order to create and maintain a good self-image. The reviewed studies have demonstrated that greatly. However, as it can be noticed, all these works are outside the Nigerian

contexts. More importantly, they do not concentrate on undergraduates' in Nigerian universities and therefore, left a gap which this study intends to fill. But the reviewed works and this current paper are similar in their application of Goffman's self-presentation model and Brown and Levinson's face and politeness theory.

Theoretical Framework

Self-presentation refers to how people attempt to present themselves to control or shape how others view them. The idea was created by Goffman in the late 20th-century as a framework for understanding social interaction. His primary interests were to reveal how individuals present themselves when in the presence of others, and the self-image people intend to front during social interaction (Goffman, 1959; Sandstrom, et al., 2006; Smith, 2006). Goffman developed this dramaturgical framework as a way of drawing analogy between social interactions in real life and theatrical stage productions. According to Sandstrom et al (2006), as stage actors, individuals have to translate their “desires, feelings, beliefs, and self-images into communicable form, drawing on words, gestures, scripts, props, scenery, and various features of appearance” (p. 128).

One of Goffman's major concerns was that people try to establish and maintain favourable impressions believable to their audience. The members of the audience can applaud the actors' performances or grumble at their apparent incompetence. People's behaviors result from their understanding of social situations and are so used to presenting themselves in particular ways in front of particular audience that they are usually not even aware of it. This happens, according to Goffman “only when we are placed in a situation where we are scrutinized that we become aware of how we present ourselves” (Goffman, 1959, p. 262). Brown and Levinson (1987) in developing Face and Politeness theory improved on Goffman's self-presentation theory by suggesting that people tend to present themselves in specific ways when there is a sense of misinterpretation and disapproval. They further explained that there are two types of faces - one based on a desire for approval and acceptance by others (positive face), and the other based on the desire to proceed without been impeded upon (negative face).

These variations exist on the ground that: first, face as a notion is socially or interactively based. Second, face is the specific image we present to another; third, the image presented is accepted by the requirements of the situation and context; fourth, our level of consciousness and intent about the face we present varies in interpretation by others; and finally, face is displayed through behaviour especially the way we communicate and interact (Redmond, 2015).

Brown and Levinson (1987) identified three components of face: positive face, negative face and threatened face. Positive face is “the want of every member that his/her 'want' be desirable to at least some others” (p. 62). These 'wants' include everything from the value to maintain (attachment, education, social, intelligent, smart) to the things we want to become (famous, be studious, be communal, go to movies and forth). They are the elements of our face that are present when we interact

with others. Negative face, according to them “is the 'want' for every competent adult member, that their action be unimpeded by others” (p. 63). That is, we want to do things and we want other people to let us do them. For example, when one sits in the office to work; your negative face is that you want to be left alone. If someone starts a conversation, they are intervening in your effort to maintain that want, hence - your negative face.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 64) consider the third component- face threatening as an element of politeness theory. They define it as “those acts that by their very nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee or speaker”. Face threatening acts can be towards our positive or negative face which we engage in or are acted on by others towards us. Positive and negative faces exist in human culture universally and it is vulnerable to threatening when the addressee and/or the speaker act in opposition to the wants and desires of the others. This is inevitable and, hence, the need for self-presentation strategies to serve as a means of controlling the face threatening by maintaining the desired image and want of the target audience.

Self-presentation is the action taken by a person to make whatever she/he is doing consistent with face. That is, the engagement in varieties of actions that help maintain the face already presented. Goffman (1959) and Brown and Levinson (1987) postulated the major principles that relates to self-presentation and are used as strategies by addressees and speakers thus:

- **Discretion:** ignoring those things which might implicitly or explicitly contradict the positive claim by someone.
- **Circumlocution and deceptions:** making an ambiguous and indirect statement.
- **Joke:** the use of humour.
- **Explanation:** strategy in recognizing what is said or presented as misinterpreted and employing an explanation.
- **Approbation:** the use of praise and approval.
- **Solidarity:** this includes reinforcing people's competence in a relationship, group or organization by showing understanding, appreciation and empathy.
- **Tact:** this involves an effort to minimize face loss of other people while maximizing their sense of freedom.
- **Accepting and correcting:** for this strategy, one present face by admitting to the cause of loss of face and plan to do something about it. This action restore and repair the face one thought is lost.
- **Ignoring and denying:** acting as though nothing is wrong and as though no face is threatened as a strategy.
- **Diminishing:** acting as though a loss face is unintentional and a meaningless event.

- **Apology and compensation:** offering an apology or compensation as a strategy for repairing a loss face.

This theory is chosen generally for its relevance in accounting for how individuals present themselves when in the presence of others and the roles they occupy during social interaction. It also serves as an entry point in understanding the strategies employed by undergraduates to present and manage themselves on Facebook when they perceive a sense of misinterpretation or disapproval of their 'selves'. Specifically, the theory aid the analysis in revealing the different discursive features and communicative practices on the profile page of the students' Facebook group forums that serve as strategies for self-presentation.

Methodology

Taking the reviewed literature into consideration, this researcher joined the undergraduates' Facebook group page to see how active these students are on the page and the kind of dynamics evident on the page. The scope of the current study is Gombe State University undergraduates. This study is conducted with the voluntary participation of students ranging from 100-400 level across the various faculties and departments in the university (n = 20, male=12, female = 8 students). The data were collected from the group profile pictures, postings, likes and comments on the group page for a period of three (3) months that covered 12 teaching weeks of first semester 2018/2019 session. The data were triangulated through: (i) direct participation of the researcher and some selected students that are not part of the group; (ii) photo elicitation to enable the researcher record how these participants respond to the profile images and generate verbal discussion on the social, personal and emotional values they attached to the photos; and (iii) interviewing the administrators of the page for the reasons and rationale behind posting some of the images on the profile of the group. This method assisted the researcher to capture the different dimensions of the choices these students make in the Facebook group profiles. With the help of a smart phone (Tecno J8) with which screen pages were screenshot, the researcher systematically archived Facebook activities of the students and stored in files on the computer on a daily and weekly basis. Hard copies of the interactions were printed for analysis. The transcription convention for this paper is as follows: the original comments generated from the group page are italicized and the strategies identified are bold-faced. The photos numbered fig.1-5 are samples used as illustration in the analysis.

Analysis

Fifty-three percent of the participants state that they sense the loss of face of the students when looking at the Facebook group profiles and that they post pictures as a way of redeeming the loss face. These are perceived by the audience as a way of presenting who they are, or want to be. The participants emphasized that their initial impressions about some profile pictures were formed through the information the

profile provided.

Forty-seven percent of the participants indicate that they are aware of the fact that the audience misinterprets the Facebook profiles they post and they keep changing it as a way of correcting the interpretation. This suggests that students are aware that their faces are threatened by the impressions created through the profile pictures and that they need to provide the audience with the information they are looking for by presenting an accessible and easily understood positive face. The deliberate effort of these students to correct a threatened face is the strategies that this work set to identify. The study also examines how this is achieved by the students.

Solidarity Strategy

The strategy that is predominant in most of the comments from the participants is '**solidarity**'. A participant explained the strategy as referring to students who are always in the midst of others and frequently attend social gatherings. The strategy also connotes that the students lose some degree of self-control and rational reasoning when in such environment-what Brown and Levinson termed **negative face**. The group administrators interviewed for this study mentioned that there are many 'solidarity' related images on Facebook and noted that specific photographs on the Facebook profile are believed to give the impression that the students are just being **circumlocutive**. Solidarity and circumlocution are terms identified by Brown and Levinson as strategies used in enhancing a threatened face. This claim is illustrated by the image in 001 and the comments it generated from the page viewers.



Fig. 1 First comment: “*We're supposed to relate in the university, because we are*

university students, it's what we do...put up pictures of what you do if you are close and you've got pictures of it".

Second comment: *"I think in the university everyone wants to have this friendship school reputation...most of the students would want to portray that image just to tell everyone else, 'yeah it's right and I am getting in on the action'. University is not simply a place where students study; it is a place where students are supposed to relate".*

The third comment a reply to the second comment thus: *"I'm a gee; I mean a guy who goes out and party on the weekend and drinks a little. I would say I'd probably fit into that ...but other people, they don't relate at all. They are alone on Friday; they'll not party or relate at all".*

A participant, while looking at the above profile picture affirms that: *"I mean most people who have pictures like that... it look like they are just drinking to get drunk. They are drinking to create bond. They think it's cool. They are just drinking to accomplish a goal. So the other people see it and think that these to be good people to be friends with".*

The above comments are connected in expressing the desire of the students to come together 'bond' and 'relate with one another' and share the pictures on their Facebook group profile to avoid the risk of giving the impression that they are not 'happening undergraduates'. In another word, the students need to present their selves as relatable. This is a way of repairing a loss or threatened face and suggests that Facebook has created a social platform for undergraduates to present themselves as **confident, daring, likeable** and **fun**- attributes of a positive face.

Social Strategy

The **social** strategy portrayed in fig. 2 shows that these students have friends and enjoy spending time with them. Some of the pictures analyzed illustrate how these students socialize in both smaller and larger groups.

Students have several ways of presenting their sociability; first, by having many Facebook friends' comments on the profile, and secondly, by posting many photographs in which the student appears with one or more people. The third way is to have many postings on their personal Facebook wall. Having many comments on the wall indicate that the person is social and has good relationship with others.

Sociability is an important strategy in portraying a positive face in any social interaction. It also affirms membership in a group and provides a mechanism for sharing and negotiating the group's norms. In the same way, the social strategy provides the target audience with the 'want' by the presenters to be seen as being **attractive, sincere, friendly** and **reliable**.

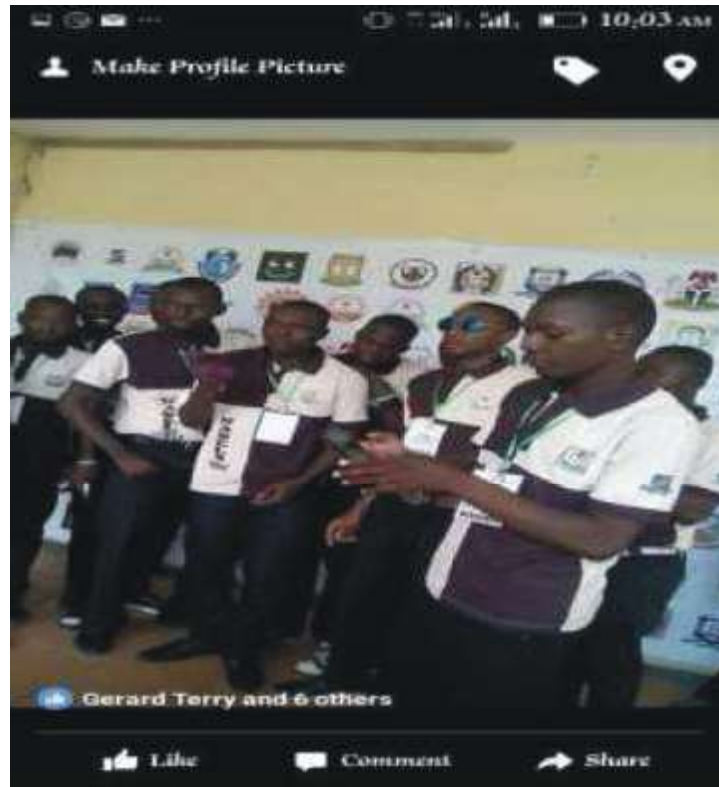


Fig. 2

Daring and Adventurous

Being **daring** and **adventurous** is a strategy mostly admired by young people, and risk-taking are sometimes motivated by the need to repair a threatened face. These results in people doing things just to prove they possess such attributes they feel are questioned. In fact, over 80 percent of the participants said they had done something just so they could capture an image to place on Facebook as a way of correcting an impression. For example, one of the profile pictures of such nature is that of a 100L student who competes in boxing. Her interest in boxing is clear in the profile photo, comments from friends, likes and even share, particularly the picture she had of herself in a boxing outfit. Some of the pictures portray the student's adventure as a call for **attention**, and the rest, as a participant states, “***She is just confident.***” This indicates that the student's positive face will be threatened if considered as not being daring. So, she decided to present herself in ways that correct the threatened face.



Fig. 3

A participant looking at the images made a statement: *“this is adventurous,” “wrestling game, that’s nice,” “Oh God!, this is fun , you are a wrestler, that is something I can do, its fun, exciting, kind of extreme.”*

The comments validate the intense desire of the students to save a threatened face by showcasing their adventurous attributes. The audience may have understood the self-image presented by the students and in turn, some were **approbative**, some showed solidarity like the commenter above and others where just **discretive**.

Humour Strategy

The study observes that **humour** appears on the group Facebook profile in text form and image form. An example is a photograph of a student who acted silly and pretended to hit a cashew seller with a tuber of yam (fig. 4). The comments that follow are equally humorous. Amazingly, one could decipher the positive face portrayal of the students from the **humorous** materials that they had on the Facebook profile. The strategy of **joke** and **humour** presents them as interesting and fun to be with. Humour does not always take the form of a funny picture or joke, but even the titles of the posts and the comments that comes after such posts.

Humour appears to be one important self-presentation strategy employed by the students on their Facebook profile to give the impression of being **jesters** and **interesting** to have around. In this way, humour poses as a facework used in enhancing interaction with the Facebook audience.



Fig. 4

Communality

It is a known fact that the University environment is a community and students are part of this community. This impression shared by these undergraduates in the images is connected to their institution or the frequent appearance of well-known symbols associated with the university. The need to explain the communal nature of the students through the profile pictures and comments is a pure indication that both the positive and the negative faces have been threatened. The face threatening act employed may be of disapproval or/and misinterpretation which necessitates the students to reassure the audience of the true nature they represent and it is achieved through the strategy of **explanation** as illustrated in the picture and comment below.



Fig. 5

Participant's Comment: *"I believe people could tell a lot about the institution by what appears in its students' Facebook page profile. That will give people a better sense of what the students might be like"*.

This strategy gave an explanation to the audience about the communal nature of the University environment and the students as a larger part of it.

Conclusion

Human beings are first and foremost social; we know ourselves and the world through social interaction, and we have developed socio-pragmatic ways to conduct these interactions. Facebook does not change any of these; it rather represents a change in degree. University undergraduates, like all humans, want to present themselves in a convincing manner to their audience, maintain their relationships, communicate with their friends, and learn about their fellow students. Facebook has provided a platform to carry out these actions and even allow a great control of self-presentation through profile management.

University students have always exhibited the students' culture, that feeling of being 'undergraduates'. In GSU, this means using the strategies of self-presentation such as: **solidarity, circumlocution, social, adventure, humor and explanation**. Facebook has provided the space for undergraduates to showcase themselves to a larger audience than ever before while at the same time making it easier for them to develop more extreme and calculated presentations of self.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that these students employ self-presentation strategies on social media and this is achievable through conscious and calculated efforts they put in presenting their "selves". The audience are in tune with the facework employed by the students and in turn employed the strategies of confidence, tact, fun, reliability, humour, adventure and competent as a way of not threatening the face. This conforms to the strategies outlined by Goffman (1957) and Brown and Levinson (1987). It is evident that these strategies are key elements in understanding undergraduate students' culture. The study recommends that social norm campaigns be created by students' affairs to enhance the positive strategies.

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