Understanding Self Advertising on Social Networking Cites: An Application of Festinger's Social Comparison Theory

"I know that people will judge me because that's what happens, that's what Facebook is about."

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facebook.

Research Focus

- The introduction of social ads on FB allow people to become 'fans' of business and brands
- FB recognised that this was something people wanted to do – they want to affiliate themselves with brands hence social ads was launched
- Just as people want to engage in conspicuous consumption in their 'real' lives this platform suggests the 'virtual' life is equally valid for presenting associations with brands
- Hence, this study!   Exploring self advertising and impression management on FB

Introduction

- Developing and creating an image is a fundamental part of human communication
- The process of impression management is a method of protecting/enhancing self esteem
- The online environment is perfect platform for precise impression management
- Identity can be manipulated online – who to present? Ideal self or true self?
- Social networking sites are a platform for 24/7 manipulation, advertising and censoring of the self

Impression Management

- Impression management or self presentation is the process used by people to convey personal characteristics including appearance, body odour and behavioural actions which all serve as important conduits for communication (Zarghooni, 2007).

- This natural process of human interaction can happen on a conscious or unconscious level (Leary, 1996).

- On a conscious level, Schlenker (1985) suggests that self presentational behaviour can be used tactically to ensure that behaviour and image are compatible with a given setting.

- The conscious process of impression management demonstrates that an individual is trying to exercise control over the impression that people form about them (Leary and Kowalski, 1990)

The Self-Concept and Computer Mediated Environments

- Actual, ideal and social self concept (Mehta, 1999)
- Social self concept once an 'occasional' role – not any more!
- The CME environment allows identity to be constructed and re-constructed easier than in the real world
- The CME environment allows people to present a variety of multiple selves hence CMEs are regarded as "playgrounds for postmodern personalities" (Marcus, Machilek and Schutz, 2006, p.1014).
- Zywica and Danowski (2008) suggest that through the use of screen names, profiles and messages, a resource has been formed by which users can manipulate others' 'impression formation' about their self concept.

Self concept and self-esteem

- Self concept – assimilation and differentiation
- Equilibrium of this can be realised through self advertising, by the shaping and fabrication of the self by one's physical or mental persona.
- People with a high self-esteem are more likely to use an acquisitive self-presentational style, which seeks approval
- While those with low self-esteem are more likely to be self protective, trying to prevent or lessen any social disapproval

Social Comparison

- The process of comparing oneself to others is not new however, the CME means that the occasions and frequency of availability for comparison are bordering infinite.

- Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) asserts that individuals learn about their personal attitudes through engaging in a process of comparison with others.

- The comparison standard is either better off or worse of than you
  - Downward- often results in positive effect
  - Upward – often results in negative effect

This Study

- Recognising the common trait of social comparison and impression management in people's lives, this study focuses on the application of these identity tactics in the online environment. Specifically this study will address the following research objectives:

1. Examine the use of Facebook as a platform for social comparison
2. How do Facebook user's negotiate impression management online?
3. Understand self advertising in the Facebook environment.

Method

- Exploratory study
- 10 in-depth interviews with FB users
- Female university students aged 19-25
- Interviews transcribed verbatim
- Analysed using a thematic approach

Findings

- 4 key themes to discuss
  1. Facebook is a site of social comparison,
  2. Effects on self esteem,
  3. Role of self monitoring,
  4. Self advertising.

FB – a place for Social Comparison

- "I want to see what are they doing, where are they in life, are they doing better than me." (R3)
- "To see if I'm better than them." (R8)
- "To compare myself to them, definitely to compare myself to them." (R4)

Past

- "I visit people from my old schools profiles to see if they have become disgusting, which makes me feel really low and spiteful." (R10)
- "People I went to school with to see what's happened to them over the past three years" (R8)

EX-PARTNERS

- "My boyfriends ex girlfriend I'd go on and check them out" (R4)

- "I guess it's like a boyfriend's ex or a friend's ex boyfriend ,yeah, to see what they look like and see what they are like" (R3)

- "Your boyfriend's ex's like finding out, your ex's new girlfriend, things like that" (R2)

Comparison Standard

- "I would look at other people on my course as well especially round about now, I try to look up people I don't even really know to see how far along they are." (R2)

- "I judge what jobs they've got and stuff and how much experience they've got, especially now I'm applying for jobs." (R3)

- "Because I've made quite a few big mistakes in my life and I like to see that somebody else is making a mess of their life as well." (R7)

- "I'm judging whether they have happy lives or successful lives." (R10)

Effects on Self Esteem: Self evaluation, self improvement, self enhancement

- Upward and downward comparisons
- Dependant on the motive for social comparison
  - Martin and Gentry (1997) – Self Evaluation 'the need to evaluate the self concept as a whole'

    - "If they seem on Facebook like on paper better than me, then I guess it would affect my esteem for the worst." (R3)
    - "If somebody looks like they are having a party every day. I'll be like am I really boring or something?" (R5)

Self Improvement

- The Comparison is either a threat or an inspiration

  - "friends that are perfect":
  - "Occasionally I feel angry, upset at me, a wee bit disappointed that I don't do as much as I could to portray the perfect body or image."(R9)
  - "I see someone who is thinner and I think I wish, well not wish I could be that, I could be that if I just didn't eat. So I feel a wee bit annoyed with myself." (R4)

Self Enhancement

- Focus negatively on the standard and positively on the self concept
  - "I'll be like she's doing much better than me in that respect, she's so much prettier and she's so much taller, thinner whatever. Then I find myself going through her status and comments and being like she's really boring, she's not funny. Thinking she might be pretty but I've got more friends than her, things like that. So I guess it is trying to make yourself feel better." (R2)

Self Monitoring

- Self monitoring is the need to censor what is advertised about the self concept to acquire a socially more acceptable standing.
  - "I'd be careful about what I wrote about myself and how I projected myself to people; it's more like a censored version of me."(R3)
  - "I did photo shop a picture to make me look prettier. I made the lighting better, made my eyes look bluer and my face look thinner."(R8)
  - "I might exaggerate a night; I might say I had the best night ever when it was so totally not the best night ever." (R4)
  - "I wouldn't do lies."(R2)
  - "I'm never untruthful, I never lie about anything" (R6)

Self Advertising

- "I'm not particularly bothered because I'm really hot, they can look all they want." (R7)

- "I tend to tell myself other people aren't that bothered about my profile." (R6)

- It represents my personality because it's quite an individual photo" (R8)

Conclusion

- FB encourages the promotion of the self and social comparison with peers
  - Physical attributes are important
  - Intellectual and achievement attributes also important
- **Models of upward and downward comparison (Smeesters and Mandel, 2006) are the most prevalent within social networking**
- **Self enhancement - once a method of protecting self esteem now more difficult**
- **Fabrication of the 'self' is rife**
- **The need to manage and control web content to maintain the desired self image**

Implications

- Clearly narcissism is alive and well on FB!
- The importance of image and identity in the online environment means management of brands and the social ads they create is vitally important
- Recognising the influential role of FB as a communication tool – identifying market mavens is important
- This study was limited to FB's core demographic of young students – to what extent is self advertising and impression management a core goal of other users?