

## **PRESENTATION OF SELF AMONG SOCIAL MEDIA USERS IN ASSAM: APPROPRIATING GOFFMAN TO FACEBOOK USERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

by

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### **Abstract**

*The advent of the Internet has challenged the traditional concept of 'identity.' The anonymity associated with the medium of Internet means that there is no reliable identification or recognition of people, or even corroboration of their claimed identities. With the rise of the 'nonymous' social networking sites like Facebook, the lines between real identity and virtual identity have become even more blurred and nebulous. Identities are parts of larger sense of self, and as such, they are internalized self-designations associated with positions that individuals occupy within various social contexts (Stryker). Underlying all social interaction, there seems to be a fundamental dialectic. When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. Drawing on symbolic interaction, especially focusing on the works of Erving Goffman, this paper discusses how Facebook provides the perfect platform to its users for online identity construction. On Facebook, users deliberately craft and maintain their profiles according to the identity they want to portray and the perceptions they want to influence. In order to identify themes and trends, a survey was conducted among young Facebook users in Assam, investigating users' interpretation of their self-presentation on Facebook. Survey data shows how Facebook serves as a 'front stage' where people construct identities as part of their performance before an audience using a multitude of props such as profile description, profile image, group membership, photographs, and befriending tools in this continuous process of performing identity. The research also examines how young people project a virtual identity, on Facebook to perpetuate certain ideas of the 'self', which may quite be at variance with their actual existential situation.*

**Keywords: Presentation of self, Identity, Online Communities, Slactivism, Facebook**

## INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites have gained tremendous traction in recent years as popular online hangout spaces for both youth and adults (Boyd, 2010). With over 1.15 billion active users, Facebook has become the most popular social networking site in the world. India too accounts for the second highest subscriber base in the world with over 100 million active users (April, 2014). Industry data also reveal that a young demography belonging to the age group of 18-34 years is fuelling this Facebook revolution in the country, as they account for 76 per cent of the total active users. Despite the increasing popularity of these sites in India, very little is known about the psychosocial variables that predict people's use of these websites in this country. There is little research investigating how individuals are using these social networking sites.

Research, in other parts of the world shows that people use social networks to fulfill a variety of social needs, including self-expression and self-presentation (Back et al.2010; Gosling, Gaddis, and Vazire 2007). Over the last forty years, Erving Goffman's seminal ideas about the dynamics of 'self' have been significantly extended and refined theoretically and assessed by careful empirical research. The paper discusses Erving Goffman's theory of identity construction and identity performance as a framework through which to investigate how Facebook users utilize the Facebook Groups feature to represent themselves on the site.

Other studies, have stressed the potential or limit of the Internet to advance political communication (for example, Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg 2001, 2004; Dahlgren 2005, 2009; Papacharissi 2002, 2009). The rise of blogs, social networking sites, micro blogs, wikis and content sharing sites has resulted in public discussions on the implications of these media for the political realm. There are, on the one hand, more optimistic and, on the other hand, more skeptical views. This study seeks to explore if a relationship exists between online community association patterns of Facebook users with their virtual identity performances as well as online social and political activism.

### **Facebook as 'Front Stage' of identity Construction:**

Erving Goffman is considered 'one of twentieth century's most remarkable practitioners of social science' (Smith, 2006:1). Goffman talks about the way in which an individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others (1990a:9). In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman uses some of the ideas of dramaturgical social psychology and focuses on how an actor creates the impression

they give to others. Every individual is trying to persuade others to believe in their character (1990), and in order to do this they need to deliver a performance, by which Goffman means ‘all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period...before a set of observers and which has some influence on the observers’ (1990a:32). How an individual conveys the information to their audience is termed by Goffman as the ‘front’ (1990).

Facebook can be seen as part of a ‘front stage’ where people construct identities as part of their performance before an audience. It provides the opportunity for individuals to use props such as user profile information, photo posting/sharing/tagging, status updates, ‘Like’ and ‘Unlike’ others posts, comments or wall posts, profile image/cover page image, online befriending, group/community membership, web links and security and privacy settings. These can be seen as the tools employed by users in the continuous process of identity formation and re-formation. While people construct identities in all parts of their lives, this performance is particularly evident on Facebook. When Facebook users build their profiles and comment on friends' status messages, they make conscious choices about how to construct an online identity. These users attempt to manage the impression others receive of them by guessing what their interpretation of their performance will be. Facebook Groups are a large part of identity performance on the virtual platform and help construct virtual communities. Prior research has shown some Facebook groups are active forums for discussion and information while most others, are purely tools for identity creation.

### **Facebook as virtual public sphere:**

In discussions about the Internet and the public sphere, many authors have stressed the potential or limit of the Internet to advance political communication (for example, Benkler 2006; Dahlberg 2001, 2004; Dahlgren 2005, 2009; Papacharissi 2002, 2009). The rise of social networking sites like Facebook has resulted in public discussions on the implications of these media for the political realm. Several scholars in the field are of the view that Facebook constitutes a new public sphere of political communication that has emancipatory political potentials. Clary Shirky argued in 2008 that the political use of ‘social media’ ultimately enhances freedom:

“Social tools create what economists would call a positive supply-side shock to the amount of freedom in the world.” . . . “To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others. With the arrival of globally accessible publishing, freedom of speech is now freedom of the press, and freedom of the press is freedom of assembly.” (Shirky 2008, 172).

Papacharissi (2010, 21) has advanced an approach that is comparable to the one by Shirky, in which she argues that political activities that were in former times “activities pursued in the public realm” are today practised in the private realm “with greater autonomy, flexibility, and potential for expression”. Social media like Facebook would make the private sphere “a sphere of connection and not isolation, as it serves primarily to connect the personal to the political, and the self to the polity and society” (Papacharissi 2010, 164).

It is in this context, that the present study seeks to assess the gratifications derived by users from virtual groups and communities they subscribe to on Facebook, as well as their subsequent levels of engagement in such groups. Overall, the paper attempts to understand whether Facebook Groups/Communities are used as tools for identity performance or as forums for discussion and activism.

**Method**

Survey data were collected from 403 university students, all active Facebook users, studying in three universities of Assam. These Facebook users’ self-reported psychological well-being was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale developed by sociologist, Dr. Morris Rosenberg and the Life Satisfaction Scale by Ed Diener et al. (1985)- to arrive at a definitive conclusion as to whether psychological well-being determines Facebook user’s online group affiliations and on their online identity formations.

**Results**

The first significant finding of the present study is related to the Facebook users’ psychological well-being. Of the 403 Facebook users who took part in this survey, majority clearly had a lack of both self-esteem and life satisfaction.

**Table1: Self-Esteem of Facebook Users (Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale)**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Low self Esteem	140	34.7
Moderate self Esteem	261	64.8
High self Esteem	2	.5
Total	403	100.0

**Table2: Life Satisfaction of Facebook Users (Satisfaction with Life Scale)**

		Frequency	Valid Percent
<b>Valid</b>	<b>Low Satisfaction</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>41.8</b>
	<b>Moderate Satisfaction</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>44.3</b>
	<b>High Satisfaction</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>13.9</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Missing</b>	<b>System</b>	<b>1</b>	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>403</b>	

While personality traits potentially influence how people use Facebook and consequently the social benefits they can reap from that use, it is still unclear how Facebook use and attitudes relate to psychological well-being. Ellison et al. found that students with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction benefited from Facebook use, as it allowed them to improve their social capital and thereby help in identity construction in a virtual world.

In this study it was considered important to know if virtual community membership and online behaviour was an extension or reflection of Facebook users' real-life psychological well-being.

First, respondents were asked if they are part of any Facebook community or group or if they have subscribed to any page on Facebook. The findings reveal that majority of the respondents (70 per cent) were members of some or the other group or community on Facebook, irrespective of the self-esteem levels of the respondents.

**Table 3: Are you part of any Facebook Group(s)/Self Esteem**

		TOTAL		
		YES	NO	
<b>Low self Esteem</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>134</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>78.4%</b>	<b>21.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Moderate self Esteem</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>240</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>65.8%</b>	<b>33.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>High self Esteem</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>376*</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>70.4%</b>	<b>29.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

\*n =376 because of missing data.

## Facebook Groups

Facebook Groups allow users to bundle friends into packs of similar interests, ideologies, value-systems and world-views. People get to form their own communications networks and they are able to collaborate and communicate more effectively as a result. Table 4 shows that respondents are members of varied online groups and communities ranging from those related to self growth and development like jobs and career, news and current affairs, to groups catering to individual interests and hobbies, travel, beauty and fashion, lifestyle, entertainment as well as groups advocating different social causes.

Table 4 also shows that a majority of respondents in this study subscribe to online groups that relate to their hobbies and interests. More than eighteen per cent of the respondents said they were members of groups related to their own hobbies and interests. The minimum score was seen to be for groups related to travel. Only 3.6 per cent of the respondents said they were members of travel related communities or groups on Facebook. Another thread of the analysis looked into the relation between self esteem and the types of groups followed on Facebook. Data reveals clear distinctions in the group membership behaviour among respondents of different levels of psychological well-being. While Facebook users with low and moderate self-esteem subscribe to or become members of groups related to hobbies and interests; those with high self-esteem were seen to follow communities related to jobs and career besides groups that were interest-oriented.

**Table 4: Type of Facebook Group(s) Joined/Self Esteem**

Type of Groups	Self Esteem						No. of Respondents	
	Count & percentage within Self Esteem group						Total	%
	Low Self Esteem		Moderate Self Esteem		High Self Esteem			
Jobs & Career	41	16.9%	69	14.5%	2	100%	112	15.4%
Films & Music	46	19%	56	11.7%	1	50%	103	14.1%
Hobbies & Interest	52	21.4%	82	17.2%	2	100%	136	18.7%
News & current affairs	19	7.8%	59	12.4%	1	50%	79	10.8%
Beauty & Fashion	5	2%	24	5%	0	0%	29	3.98%
Lifestyle	9	3.7%	26	5.4%	0	0%	35	4.8%
Social /Political Causes	26	10.7%	59	12.4%	1	50%	86	11.8%
Travel	2	0.82%	23	4.8%	0	0%	25	3.4%
Books & authors	22	9%	49	10.3%	1	50%	72	9.9%
Others	20	8.26%	28	5.8%	2	100%	50	6.8%
<b>Total within self esteem group</b>	<b>242*</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>475*</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>10*</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>727*</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*More than total in category because of multiple options chosen by respondents

## Facebook Groups Uses and Gratifications

The study also assessed the gratifications derived by users from virtual groups and communities they subscribe to on Facebook, as well as their subsequent levels of engagement in such groups.

Principal components factor analysis revealed the following four needs for using Facebook Groups: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. Each factor had an Eigen value of at least 1 (socializing, 7.04; entertainment, 1.68; self-status seeking, 1.34; information, 1.05), accounting for 69.5 per cent of the variance. Individuals who participate in Facebook Groups to satisfy socializing needs are generally interested in meeting and talking with others as well as getting peer support and a sense of community.

**Table 5: Factor Analysis of Facebook Group Uses and Gratifications**

Reasons for participating in Facebook Groups	Factors			
	1	2	3	4
<b>Factor 1: Socializing</b>				
For garnering peer support	0.81	0.15	0.24	0.23
To meet interesting people	0.79	0.11	0.19	0.15
For community-like feeling	0.70	0.21	0.32	0.19
To discuss about different issues	0.70	0.26	0.00	0.33
Maintain contact with people I know	0.60	0.23	0.08	0.32
<b>Factor 2: Entertainment</b>				
For its entertaining value	0.19	0.86	0.04	0.19
Because it is funny	0.14	0.84	0.08	0.20
Because it is exciting	0.49	0.61	0.32	0.11
<b>Factor 3: Self-status seeking</b>				
All my friends are on FB	0.02	0.04	0.81	0.06
Because it makes me look cool	0.14	0.33	0.73	0.07
For career development and online networking	0.24	0.02	0.73	0.12
<b>Factor 4: Information seeking</b>				
To get information about outside/foreign issues	0.23	0.19	0.09	0.86
To learn about local events	0.21	0.19	0.10	0.86
To get useful information about product/services	0.42	0.09	0.21	0.63
<b>Eigen value</b>	<b>7.04</b>	<b>1.68</b>	<b>1.34</b>	<b>1.05</b>
<b>Variance explained</b>	<b>30.91</b>	<b>10.21</b>	<b>8.40</b>	<b>11.53</b>
<b>Cronbach's a</b>	<b>0.87</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<b>0.83</b>

Entertainment gratification refers to engagement in Facebook Groups for leisure and amusement needs. As for information needs, Facebook Groups users intend to learn about different events, issues and details regarding specific products and services. Finally, survey respondents are likely to participate in Facebook Groups for several reasons related to seeking and maintaining their personal status through

online group participation. The respondents answered that they joined groups because they felt peer pressure, wanted to look cool, and to develop their career through group participation.

Findings clearly suggest that people use social networks to fulfill a variety of social needs, including self-expression and self-presentation (Back et al. 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, and Vazire 2007). Consequently, using a social network can enhance self-esteem and positively affect well-being (Gonzales and Hancock 2011; Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006).

### **Political Engagement on Facebook**

Engagement through social networking sites has become a marked feature of political and civic life for a significant portion of young people. Previous work by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life has documented the key role that the Internet and social media play in people's participation in groups and organizations. Other project studies have shown how those who use social media, especially Facebook, are more civically and politically active than non-users, and how those who use social media to participate in civic and political life are more diverse in socio-economic terms than those who participate in civic affairs through more traditional online and offline activities such as signing petitions or interacting with news organizations.

This study found that only a small group of respondents started or joined a political group, or a community supporting a political group on Facebook. Only 34 per cent of the respondents said that they were involved in politics through Facebook. Majority said they were not in any way involved with politics through their online networks.

Political engagement through Facebook was found to be of almost the same intensity among all respondents in this study except for the people with high self esteem. Respondents with low and moderate self esteem reported a low percentage of political engagement on Facebook with 35.4 per cent and 36 per cent respondents respectively saying they had joined or started a political group or supported a group engaged in online politics.

This tendency was however found to be different among those respondents with high self esteem. These Facebook users claimed that they were all (100 per cent) members of such groups related with politics.

**Table 6: Have you started or joined a political group, or group supporting a political group on Facebook**

<b>Have you started or joined a political group, or group supporting a political group on Facebook</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Low self Esteem</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>126</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>35.4%</b>	<b>63.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Moderate self Esteem</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>225</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>36.0%</b>	<b>64.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>High self Esteem</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>353</b>
	<b>% within Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</b>	<b>36.2%</b>	<b>63.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Overall, there are mixed partisan and ideological patterns among users when it comes to using Facebook for discussing, sharing disseminating political content. Among people who do use Facebook for discussing politics, their activities are as varied as - posting their own thoughts about issues, posting links to political material, encouraging others to take political action, following elected officials on social media, and ‘liking’ or promoting political material others have posted.

Here are some of the other key findings of the representative survey:

- 38 per cent of those who started or joined a political group, or group supporting a political entity on Facebook, use these groups to “like” or promote material related to politics or social issues that others have posted.
- 35 per cent of these users have used the tools to encourage people to vote.
- 34 per cent users have posted their own thoughts or comments on political and social issues.
- 33 per cent users have reposted content related to political or social issues that were originally posted by someone else.
- 31 per cent users have used online groups to encourage other people to take action on a political or social issue that is important to them.
- 28 per cent users have posted links to political stories or articles for others to read.

- 20 per cent users have joined online groups to follow elected officials and political leaders.
- Interestingly, only 3 per cent have taken part in any political activity offline that was initiated and promoted online through Facebook groups.

Online political activism can cause material and symbolic harm and be a threat to the powerful political elites. However, as the survey shows respondents are into a kind of ‘online politics’ that is by and large harmless (writing a blog, posting a tweet or YouTube video, signing an online petition, joining a Facebook group, etc.) and can simply be ignored by the powerful. Overall, these young Facebook users merely perform a spectatorial role and refrain from posting or disseminating civic or political content in these groups, and remain largely dormant.

### Frequency of Political Engagement:

When asked how frequently, people who are politically active online through Facebook, interact with others to discuss politics, it was seen that even though some of the respondents were members of some or the other political groups on Facebook, they did not interact regularly in these groups. Most of the respondents did so only rarely.

**Table 7: How often do you discuss politics on Facebook?**

		HOW OFTEN DO YOU DISCUSS POLITICS ON FB					Total
		everyday	atleast once a week	atleast once in a month	less than once a month	never	
Low self Esteem	Count	2	16	27	38	52	135
	% within	1.5%	11.9%	20.0%	28.1%	38.5%	100.0%
Moderate self Esteem	Count	10	27	31	60	111	239
	%	4.2%	11.3%	13.0%	25.1%	46.4%	100.0%
High self Esteem	Count	0	0	0	1	1	2
	%	.0%	.0%	.0%	50%	50%	100.0%
Total	Count	12	43	58	99	164	376
	%	3.1%	11.4%	15.42%	26.3%	43.6%	100.0%

Most of the respondents did not discuss politics on Facebook. In this study, 43.6 per cent of the respondents said they never discussed politics on the site. Of the rest who did discuss politics and political issues on the social networking site, 46.6 per cent discussed only rarely.

Only 3.1 per cent of all the respondents in the present research were found to be discussing politics on an everyday basis. 11.4 per cent did so at least once a week while another 15.42 per cent engaged in active political discussion at least once a month.

### **Facebook Groups Gratifications and Civic and Political Involvement**

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine gratifications to predict civic and political involvement. Information needs positively and significantly predict Facebook Groups users' civic participation after controlling for demographics, life satisfaction, and self esteem ( $\beta$  0.14,  $p < 0.001$ ). Life satisfaction and self-esteem significantly predict civic engagement among Facebook Group users ( $\beta$  0.27,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta$  0.23,  $p < 0.001$  respectively). Even after controlling for demographics, the level of life satisfaction and self esteem determines whether Groups users engage in civic events in their local communities. Respondents with greater life satisfaction and self esteem more actively participate in civic activities than do those with lower life satisfaction and self esteem. Facebook Groups users' political engagement is positively and significantly predicted by Facebook Groups use for gathering information about events ( $\beta$  0.13,  $p < 0.001$ ), socializing ( $\beta$  0.12,  $p < 0.01$ ), and self-status seeking ( $\beta$  0.12,  $p < 0.01$ ). When the four categories of gratifications are added to the model, the R-square change is 6 per cent after controlling for demographics and life satisfaction. While entertainment-purposed Groups users do not contribute to users' participation in political actions, information-purposed users are likely to be involved in political events through friend networking. In addition, they feel peer pressure to join and participate in Facebook Groups, which in turn makes Groups members engage in political actions.

### **Conclusion**

The proponents of SNS technologies argue that the potential of computer-mediated communication will encourage the construction of a virtual public sphere (Pavlik, 1994). This virtual public sphere can help the public overcome the physical and social constraints and

communicate more freely and openly, thus promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas. That they can provide an avenue for social and political activism, and controversial issues and peripheral voices that are never heard in the mainstream media can be expressed without big constraints. Lindgren and Lundström (2011) argue that Facebook and the Internet have “a particularly strong potential” to create a space for what Ulrich Beck terms sub politics: politics that are not “governmental, parliamentary, and party politics”, but take place in “all the other fields of society” (Beck 1997, 52). These assumptions have led proponents to believe that these virtual platforms can increase social and political participation and pave the way for democracy.

The findings of this study question some of these assumptions. The study has shown that Facebook use among young users is predominantly as an information seeking and sharing medium, not as a communicative tool. It is principally about entertainment, not about politics. Politics is a minority topic on Facebook, which is dominated by entertainment.

The statistics show that the levels of political and civic engagement among Facebook users in Assam were considerably low. Even among those users who did engage in politics online, it did not translate to their real-life activism on the ground and their engagement within such groups remained largely nominal. The level and pattern of political engagement seen among the young users in this study can be compared to what Malcolm Gladwell terms as ‘slacktivism’ -the kind of activism associated with social media would only succeed in situations that do not require people “to make a real sacrifice” (Gladwell 2010, 47). Slacktivism (sometimes slactivism or slackervism) is a portmanteau of the words slacker and activism. The word is usually considered a pejorative term that describes “feel-good” measures, in support of an issue or social cause, that have little or no practical effect other than to make the person doing it take satisfaction from the feeling that they have contributed. The acts tend to require minimal personal effort from the slacktivist.

Evgeny Morozov (2009) speaks in line with Gladwell’s argument of ‘slacktivism’ as:

...“feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in “slacktivist” campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group.” . . .

“Slacktivism” is the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation: why bother with sit-ins and the risk of arrest, police brutality, or torture if one can be as loud campaigning in the virtual space?”

Social media, as findings of this study suggest, ‘make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact’ (Gladwell 2010, 49). Clearly, the virtual public sphere that social media has helped create, appears to be asymmetrical, with regard to use and observable patterns of online engagement, which appear to be insufficient to live up to the Habermasian ideals of rational critical discourse.

Nevertheless, Facebook group membership and online affiliations, as seen in this study, live up to Goffman’s metaphor of a ‘front stage’ in identity construction. While the way we manage and perform the self is by no means a new trend as Goffman’s theory shows; the virtual communities and groups on platforms like Facebook not only generate greater awareness of political issues or social causes among online users, but also facilitate in the online user’s identity construction and performance.

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