

Performing the Face

A look at the embodied sexuality in the profile photos of selected Facebook users

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Abstract—This article explores the performance of gender and sexuality in the online social network community—Facebook. It examines how members of the community present, represent and communicate their social selves in the online space considering they are also simultaneously members of the offline social world.

Keywords- Gender and sexuality, cyberspace; social network; social selves; communication; performance, Facebook

I. A PICTURE PAINTS A THOUSAND NORMS

A picture is worth a thousand words”, a phrase widely attributed to Frederick Barnard, seem to be veritable within the context of profile photos posted in cyberspace, specifically by users of the online social networking site Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>). A photo may not contain words and phrases, but it tells a story. In this paper, the story implicates the concept of sexuality, a vital aspect of a person’s disposition that affects one’s behavior toward oneself and others. I particularly focus on how a person perceives himself or herself and how that perception is channeled in this medium of communication and illustrated in the self-presentations observed in the profile photos. Thus, this article seeks to answer the question: How do we perform gender and sexuality through pictures on the Internet? This article brings in perspectives of mobility and the pop culture brought about by the emergence of new media, an example of which is Facebook. The subject matter brings in both essentialist and constructivist views on gender and sexuality as they are implicated in a different space—the online space.

Pierre Bourdieu explains that a person is a socially informed body that operates within the “principle generating and unifying all practices” called the habitus (Bourdieu as cited in Csordas, 1990). It is interesting to explore how the habitus in the virtual community generate and create concepts of gender and sexuality and how they are maintained and unified. Do images conform to the prescribed gender and sexual roles we have learned and embodied in the offline world?

Sexuality is almost always viewed in connection with gender. Sexuality is explicated as the central aspect of being human throughout life, encompassing sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction; it is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships, and influenced by social, biological, psychological, cultural, economic, political, legal,

historical and religious factors (Dalisyay, 2009). In this article, the expression of sexuality is discerned in the profile photos in Facebook, where gender is very much influential. Gender is understood on the other hand as being between males and females that are socially constructed, changeable over time, and that have wide variations within and between cultures. A socio-economic and political variable with which to analyze roles, responsibilities, constraints and opportunities of people, it considers both males and females (Dalisyay, 2009). How do the elements mentioned affect the perception of gender and sexuality in cyberspace through self-presentations in profile photos in Facebook?

Judith Butler on the “performativity of identities”, asserts that social reality is not a given but is continually created as an illusion through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign. Facebook profile photos fall under the category of “symbolic social sign”. This idea is related to John Searle’s illocutionary speech acts in his speech act theory, which states that speech acts “do something” rather than merely “represent something”. Within the speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names”. The intentional action of posting one’s photo in cyberspace is a performance of broadcasting one’s self concept, which consequently also shows one’s perceived sexuality. Utilizing Butler’s concept of performativity, it maintains that the body is involved in the enactment of gender. These “gender acts” result to the creation of our sense of subjectivity but that does not make our subjectivity any less constructed. Furthermore, our sense of independent, self-willed subjectivity is a retroactive construction that comes about only through the enactment of social conventions: “gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior “self” whether that “self” is conceived as sexed or not” (Butler as cited in Felluga). Are these contentions relevant in cyberspace, especially when it is a venue where people have the freedom to choose what photo to post and how he or she is framed and presented in that photo? Are the netizens given more liberty to create embodiments of the selves in this space? Are they consciously aware of the relatively lack of restrictions? These questions may be answered implicitly through the self-presentations in the profile pictures of the informants.

A. Statement of the Problem

This paper seeks to explore the self-presentations of people in the social networking site Facebook, which implicate gender and sexuality.

Specific objectives are:

- To describe the Facebook users' embodiment of gender and sexuality through their profile pictures;
- To examine the symbols used in the performance of gender and sexuality;

It is admittedly difficult to explore cyberspace since it is loosely defined in abstract and ambiguous terminologies within a fragmented behavioral environment. Hallowell (1971) explains this environment as a place that includes not only natural objects but culturally reified ones; it also links behavior to the objective world and to the perceptual processes with social constraints (Hallowell as cited in Csordas, 1990). Sherry Ortner (1984) argues that behavioral environment is a terminological composite that stands for the context in which practice is carried out (Csordas, 1990).

The context in this study is cyberspace, which may be classified in the global category. Henrietta Moore tackles methodology and theory on the conceptualization of the relationship between the global and local and emphasizes the importance of deploying concept metaphors that can aid in the examination of concepts and perspectives. Concept metaphors such as global, gender, the self and the body are domain terms that orient us towards areas of shared exchange. They are also examples of catachresis, i.e. metaphors that have no adequate referent. Their exact meanings can never be specified in advance, although they can be defined in practice and context—there is a part of them that remains outside or exceeds representation (Moore, 2006).

In the social networking setting of Facebook, profile pictures are posted with the owners' intention to stimulate an embodied perception amongst the audience. It therefore involves the participation of the audience to whom the users are publishing their self-representations. The participation is observed in the reactions verbalized through posted comments. A perceived community therefore is present as well, although in this space, rules and behavioral norms are still in the process of being "made". The symbols used in the profile pictures, how they posed, the clothes they wore, the angle in which the photo was taken, etc., are analyzed in relation to the gender and sexuality perspective.

To answer the first objective (to describe the Facebook users' embodiment of gender and sexuality through their profile pictures), the photos are analyzed within Judith Butler's performativity framework utilizing biological and social perspectives in the presentation of gender and sexuality, which will be limited to female and male. The second objective (to examine the symbols used in the performance of gender and sexuality), is achieved by first identifying the symbols used in the photos, e.g., poses, facial expressions, clothes, accessories, surroundings/scenery, background, framing and other special effects, and then relating them to gender and sexuality issues. The last objective (to analyze how the offline society influence the construction of gender and sexuality as expressed in the profile pictures) implicates the concept of body politics (Scheper-Hughes) in the performance of gender and sexuality as observed in the self-presentations on the Internet.

II. EMBODYING THE SELF

Our "selves" are embodied in various ways and through various forms of media. Mobility and pop culture bring in new ways of presenting, perceiving and practicing people's selfhood. Gender and sexuality are major components in the constitution of the self especially as a social being. These components are manifested in the performance of social roles in the society. As our society is being reconstituted and reframed partly because of the influence mobility and pop culture performed in a "new" space called the cyberspace, the embodiment of the self may also be subjected to the reframing and reconstituting of socially imposed and accepted norms that guide our performance of our selves. In this sense, the performance of gender and sexuality are positioned within the biological and social contexts.

The influences of social construction are also evident in the difference of bodily poses/movements performed in the photos. For instance, in a comparison of profile photos of a female and a male, both may be seen as leaning toward a direction, but the male has a more defined and precise stance compared to the female who has an arch to her body. The poses point to the perceived embodied normative view that males are supposed to be tough and precise, therefore a "curvaceous body" is never used to refer to a male's body. Females, on the other hand, are said to be soft malleable or flexible, hence are not perceived to be sexually attractive without curves. These characteristics are thought to be contributory to the performance of social roles and positions of both men and women in the social world. For instance in the area of professions, carpentry and operation of heavy machinery are usually associated to males, while care giving and nursing are usually related to females. Males being physically stronger than women and women being more nurturing than men are examples of the numerous socially constructed roles that our bodies are performing. It is apparent through the self-presentations of informants as they pose, frame and post their photos that they are adhering to the prescribed gender roles society has imposed on them. It is evident in the Facebook profile pictures that this online community submits to the offline society's normative rules.

III. SYMBOLS OF EMBODIMENT

Society has designated symbols to aid and guide us in how we view others and ourselves. Our self-presentations are dependent on how we perceive the embodiments of elements, objects and relationships that the society has designated. It is hence imperative that symbols are used to provide tangible representations of the concepts implicated and implicating our "beings". In the areas of gender and sexuality, there are numerous symbols deployed that communicate sexuality. The repeated performance and/or deployment of these symbols fortify the dominant scripts in engaging oneself in various communicative settings that involve gender and sexuality. It is equally worthy to note how much the space has influenced the informants in their self presentations, especially their discernment of how they want to be assessed and the perceived reception of people about themselves through their profile photos.

At first glance, it is apparent that profile pictures are “beautiful” representations of the physical selves. During the group discussion I conducted, (secondary data) which aimed for clarification and validation of the reasons and motivations in the selection of photos to be uploaded on the Internet, the discussants stated that a major consideration is the need to be perceived as beautiful or attractive and unique. I asked them to further elaborate on the meaning of attractive. Their answers pointed to attractiveness, which is linked to sexuality. In other words, Facebook users post their profile pictures with an expectation that their self-presentations will be perceived as sexually attractive. What symbols then aid in providing the perception of sexually attractiveness for both males and females?

In the profile photos studied, the clothes, accessories and poses are the symbols that determine how informants perceived how other people would perceive them positively in terms of their gender. For the male, the jacket, cap, and the strap of his backpack are indicative of his conformity to the prescribed symbols attached to his gender. On the other hand, the female’s hairstyle, earrings, bracelet, clothes and make-up show that the social construction of a “beautiful girl” is imbibed. However, both male and female informants perceive that smiling is a positive pose that will aid in the positive reception of their representations. It is also evident that even if both male and female perform “smiling”, the manner of smiling is different from each other. The male informant’s smile is accompanied with a bodily movement that signifies more stiffness and strength compared to the female informant’s pose that demonstrates softness and fluidity. A girl’s smile is definitely construed differently from that of a boy’s. According to the group discussion informants, the symbols that will reinforce a male’s sexual attractiveness is focused on possessing a well-built, muscled body coupled by a “nice”, “kind” or “*maamo*” (innocent) face. The appearance of cleanliness and tidiness are also helpful. In contrast, the females are perceived to be sexually attractive if they present themselves as fair-skinned, flawless, slim (for those who post their bikini-clad profile photos), nice smile, and an effortless pose. Ultimately the self-presentation is akin to self-marketing since it is obvious that the uploaded photos are intended for public viewership. Clearly, it might be construed that we (Filipinos) are still embracing the colonial gaze of patterning our idea and ideals of “beauty” within the Western perspective of physical attributes that one should possess in order to be perceived as attractive. The ultimate symbol of the whole idea of self-presentation pertains to the embodied need for social acceptance, hence the need for the hegemonized symbols to be included, incorporated and performed in this paper, in the profile photos. There is no particular type of audience in mind in the posting of framed photos; instead the global world has become the audience in this space.

IV. BODY POLITICS

The inherent need for people to be accepted in a community is what drives people to present themselves in socially accepted ways in public. Self-presentation on the Internet through profile pictures that can be viewed

practically by everybody and anybody online is just one of the many manifestations of this need. As social beings, we want to be acknowledged and are equally curious about other people’s ways and manners of creatively presenting themselves to the society. It is quite challenging to present oneself in the offline world because most of the physical and material characteristics and objects seem to be difficult to manipulate according to our own satisfaction. This will ultimately lead to achieving our plans on how we should be perceived by others. We were given new opportunities in the various ways of self-presentation when the Internet was invented and became popular as a space where people can mingle, create relationships and organize communities. In this venue where the “real” physical body is absent, we are given more freedom to choose how we should be viewed and perceived. The manipulation is totally in the hands of the person (Internet user). We choose what photo to post and how we should pose and frame ourselves in those photos. When other people view our photos, we are more or less confident that in this context the people who we consider are important in our lives will view us positively. The freedom to make decisions on the Internet concerning oneself creates the query on whether the hegemonized symbols of gender and sexuality and the behavior that result to as a consequence are still as powerful and controlling compared to the online world or not?

It is the society that imposes how we should perform our self-presentations may it be in the online or offline contexts. The rules imposed by the society implicate the body together with the rich experiences it is involved in. Through the repeated performances of the scripts on how we should behave, the regulations, ways and manners of “living in a society” are given legitimacy. Clearly, though, our presentations are also very much affected by the others’ own self-presentations. Social rules that implicate the body are often related to the subjection of the “body” to concepts of sexuality and gender. The perspectives of gender and sexuality are deemed to be vital in the overall behavior of people, since more often than not they are the most basic bases of designating social roles in the community.

It appears therefore that people have an inherent need for control—to control and to be controlled. To be able to establish control, rules are formulated. The rules are dependent and usually favor those who dominate and hold power in the society. Those who are in and possess power control the agencies within the social structures in various social institutions. As these rules are performed continually and constantly, people believe them to be “right”, “correct”, and “morally upright”. Eventually they believe that they “want” and “need” these rules to live a “proper” and “content” life. The performance of the rules creates a hegemonizing and legitimizing power bestowed on the normative rules that usually determine how life should be experienced in the social world.

When it comes to gender and sexuality, there is a clear set of rules that differentiate males from females with the major purpose of regulating people’s behaviors in the social world, especially those sexually related. There are occurrences observed in the virtual community that Internet

users may consciously or subconsciously perceive to be in need of the offline social regulation. These rules encompass and cover the social world in cyberspace; an example of its practice is through self-presentation by profile photos. Aside from the illustrated bodily movements and symbols discussed previously, social status is also communicated in this practice. It has been established in the offline society that revealing one's social, economic and political status is an expected action. This is demonstrated by the numerous documents that we need to fill out to establish and legitimize our identities, i.e., birth certificates, medical certificates, application forms, identification papers, etc. It has been ingrained in us to be curious and suspicious about each other, hence the need to establish our credibility through data and information legitimized by conventional and established social institutions. This curiosity and the imbibed rule of the need to make known and know about social statuses are performed as well on the Internet. It may not still be perceived as official and credible as in the offline world; nevertheless, it is performed. A particular example is the inclusion of the photo of a partner (male or female).

Bourdieu states that the habitus generates and unifies principles in a society. The Internet as the space wherein the habitus operates provides opportunities for people to break away from the imposed normative rules of the society. Concept metaphors such as the self, global, local, sexuality and gender are implicated in cyberspace where popular culture and mobility also transpire and are experienced. It appears that these already ambiguous concepts are continuously being interrogated and problematized as they interrelate with each other. As a result, the performance of gender and sexuality in the virtual habitus may be construed as still in the stages where the people of the offline world are being introduced to a venue where new agencies are possible for interpersonal engagements and relationships. The habitus is clearly and literally changing along with the technological advancement of the Internet. If the original intention of the Internet is to simulate the offline society, it has been discovered and continually being discovered that the space renders avenues of performances that do not merely copy those performed in the offline world. Cross-cultural views of gender and sexuality attractiveness likewise converge and create new embodiments in this space.

At present, the simulation of the social offline world is still apparent in how gender and sexuality is performed on the Internet as exemplified in the self-presentations of Internet users through their profile photos. On the other hand, it is recognized that we can easily exercise disidentification (Butler cited in Felluga) in this venue since social control is not and cannot (YET) be fully implemented on the Internet.

It is conceded that commodification, which is directly related to power and domination is present on the Internet, but the place does not favor one person/organization over another, so until people perform continually actions that contribute to their liberation, until they say "What I believe, I no longer believe," the hegemonized offline behavior toward gender and sexuality will continue to pervade.

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