

Self-presentation on Twitter

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction.....	2
Theoretical framework.....	3
Self-presentation, face, and line in tweets.....	4
Audience: imagined, potential and actual	5
Conclusion	9
References.....	10

Abstract

This paper examines the interpersonal relationship between Twitter users, and more specifically the self-presentation that is portrayed through tweets. Furthermore it discusses how an imagined audience affects user's tweeting habits. The discussion takes as its point of departure sociologist Erving Goffman's concepts of face and line from his theory on face-work (1999) in order to discuss self-presentation. Furthermore, the paper examines how Twitter user's behaviour can be understood on the platform. Bernie Hogan's (2010) term exhibition is useful as a framework for discussing audience on Twitter, in connection with Marwick and boyd's concept of context collapse to understand how users navigate the fact that the audience is made up of several different groups. Throughout our discussion we also use a few other theoretical approaches on Twitter.

We conclude that the self-presentation takes place through tweets and that this is affected by the imagined audience, which leads users to employ different forms of strategies in their tweeting.

Introduction

The concept of interpersonal communication may originally have referred primarily to face-to-face forms of interaction, but today, in the digital age, where social network sites and other media are a great part of our everyday lives, it is just as relevant, if not more, to research the impact and effects these online systems have in our interpersonal relations and communication.

The following paper is driven by the fact that profiles on Twitter, and therefore presentations of user's selves, are based more on self-produced content in the form of tweets than on meta-data about the user, compared to other social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Hence, tweets are integral to creating a profile and hereby representing a specific self-image.

This means that in order to have and maintain a self-presentation on Twitter, the user needs to have and maintain an active profile by deliberately posting tweets, to a much larger degree than users on e.g. Facebook need to post content. This, to us, means that a

Twitter user's tweets of, at the most, 140 characters of text have a somewhat larger impact on other users' impression of the user, due to the fact that people often don't know each other outside of Twitter.

This way of examining the presentation of self on Twitter has led us to the following research question:

In what way do tweets take part in portraying the user's image of self, and how does the imagined audience affect this self-presentation?

We will focus primarily on Twitter users who tweet for personal purposes and actively produce tweets themselves, rather than those who only follow others or are just retweeting for instance.

Theoretical framework

Throughout this paper we will make use of a number of sociological and communication theories, including selected concepts from Erving Goffman's theory on face-work (1999), along with a few articles introducing different theoretical perspectives on the use of Twitter.

Erving Goffman's theory face-work is useful to understand the essential of a user's self-presentation in the interaction with other users on Twitter. The fact that Goffman's theory is building on face-to-face interaction makes it necessary to include theoreticians who examine users' self-presentation on social media. In this case Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) is useful to discuss Goffman's missing focus on social media. Meyrowitz discusses Goffman's theory face-work in terms of social media and further develops his two terms front - and back stage into four regions. This paper focuses on the region called forefront. The forefront region helps to understand how user can completely control its self-presentation on Twitter. Bernie Hogan is relevant to understand how user creates his self-presentation on Twitter. Hogan argues that it is not enough to use Goffman's dramaturgical approach

when discussing online self-presentation. When Goffman focuses on face-to-face interaction, he analyzes at the same time only synchronous situations. Hogan explains the online self-presentation as asynchronous exhibitions, and therefore is Goffman's term performance not useful to discuss the research question in this paper. The term exhibition refers to that it is not only the user itself who creates the self-presentation, but he or she also often uses different artifacts such as likes, updates when portraying himself online. Marwick and boyd is primarily being used to understand how imagined audience and context collapse affects user's self-presentation.

Self-presentation, face, and line in tweets

While Goffman's theory on face-work (1999) in its origin may be seen to take its point of departure in primarily physical face-to-face interactions and situations, his framework is increasingly also being cited and used in case studies focusing on digital media and other virtual situations (e.g. Hogan, 2010; Humphreys et al., 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

In order to look at Twitter by means of Goffman's theory, we find that a couple of particularly useful terms are face and line. Firstly, there is an obvious comparison between Goffman's (1999) line and a tweet on Twitter. Goffman describes a line as follows: "(...) a line – that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself (Goffman, 1999, p. 306).

A line and a tweet are both a way of portraying a version of self or a face, whether this is done deliberately or not: "The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact." (Goffman, 1999, p. 306)

Based on Goffman's understanding of the role of the line in maintaining a face, it can arguably be said that the fundamental expectations of tweeting, and in general being active on Twitter, is to have and maintain a face (Goffman, 1999). One takes a line in each tweet, and this line must effectively present an image that is consistent with the overall face that the user has created or portrayed in the collective sum of tweets. If a user neglects to

produce tweets that are sufficiently interesting, for lack of a better term, he or she may be said to be out of face (Goffman, 1999), and thus the implicit contract of Twitter is broken. In case user is out of face, it is up to the audience to help the single user to get the face back. Without their help it is impossible to obtain the face again and align the line with the rest of users.

This leads to another of the main differences between Twitter and many other social media as well as regular face-to-face interactions, namely that only the minority of Twitter users know each other in advance: “When a person begins a mediated or immediate encounter, he already stands in some kind of social relationship to the others concerned, and expects to stand in a given relationship to them after the particular encounter ends.” (Goffman, 1999, p. 318). They may know of each other, in the case of celebrity profiles, but as our focus in this discussion is Twitter users who mainly use Twitter for personal purposes, it is rare for people to know other users when they first ‘discover’ them. The consequence of the weak relations between the Twitter users (comparing to Facebook) can be problematic if user proposes a line through a tweet that is not aligned with the line of the followers. According to Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg “(...) it is not easy to carry out face-saving work when you do not know who all the members of your audience are.”(2014, p. 53).

Audience: imagined, potential and actual

In the continuation of the above, it seems only natural to bring the audience into the discussion. When focusing on Twitter, however, this may be easier said than done.

Social media platforms nowadays are changing the boundaries and accessibility of our communication in everyday interaction, and at the same time they make our ability to read to cues in a mediated communication context nearly impossible. Not only does social media makes it complicated to figure out who you are communicating within a mediated communication context, but the internet in general complicates the idea of who the actual audience is. The opportunity to share content on the internet and the fact, that lots of

content on the internet is persistent or being archived makes it difficult to predict who is receiving the message and when is it being read (Litt, 2012).

In a face-to-face interaction the audience is visible which makes it possible for the speaker to read the different cues from the audience, and thereby adapt to the context. The audience and context are changing many times during our lives, which is why we have to be able to change our behavior as well (Eden Litt, 2012). Our ability to adapt to a certain context is also Goffman's focus when he describes his dramaturgical approach to the term performance. According to Goffman, individuals perform on multiple stages, where they are using different faces depending on the interaction and context they interact within (Papacharissi, 2012).

The fact that the audience plays an influential role in user's behavior, it is worth considering what happens to the behavior when the audience is an unknown group in mediated communication context. Twitter is one of the platforms where users don't know their actual audience and therefore they have to imagine their audience. In the text "Knock, knock. Who's there? The imagined audience" Litt quote sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's definition of the imagined audience. He describes it as" (...) the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience. It is one of the most fundamental attributes of being human." (Litt, 2012, p. 331). The consequences of the limited cues in mediated communication, result in that Twitter users have to rely on their imagination and be able to conceptualize who they are tweeting to. Hence, Twitter users are more dependent on their imagination than in a face-to-face interaction (Litt, 2012). The result of an unknown audience affects what kind of content twitter user decides to tweet (Merchant et al. 2013)

Compared to other social media, e.g. Facebook, where the potential audience (depending on your privacy settings) will usually only be people you are already "friends" with, on Twitter, the actual audience can be anyone - from nobody to everybody. In part, this is due to the various ways of reading and spreading tweets, as theorized by Alice E. Marwick & Danah Boyd (2010). The concepts of context collapse, balance, and self-censorship play a significant part on the social media platforms (Marwick & boyd, 2010). In line with

Marwick and boyd, Vitak also talks about the context collapse in social media and claims that it can create tensions when users are considering how individuals self-present across audience (Vitak, 2012). When user produces content on Twitter he or she does not know whom or what kind of audience addresses, particularly due to the fact that the content on Twitter is accessible to everybody without the viewers necessarily having a Twitter account themselves (Sergeant & Tagg, 2014). Sergeant and Tagg also point out that Twitter differs from other social platforms and the real life regarding the relation between a Twitter user and a follower - they describe the relation as non-reciprocal. Marwick and boyd (2010) state that the different groups of audiences affect single user's "...ability to vary self-presentation based on audience, and thus manage discrete impressions." (p. 116). With that in mind, it is possible, and quite likely, that user's self-presentation is based on assumptions about what the majority expects to read - and that it therefore does not necessarily give an authentic image of user's interests and authentic personality. Since the audience constitutes the authenticity, context collapse problematizes the individual's ability to shift between these selves and come off as authentic or fake. The sincere self-presentation may be sacrificed in favor of navigation between balance and self-censorship (Marwick & boyd, 2010)

When on the subject of audience, it may also be relevant to include the distinction between Goffman's notion of performance, which takes place in synchronous situations, and Bernie Hogan's (2010) introduction of asynchronous exhibition, which are made up of artifacts. The latter is especially employed in social media, and in this context we believe it makes sense to view Twitter's collection of tweets as an exhibition rather than a performance. Hogan emphasizes that an exhibition is still very much a presentation of self, only in a form much more adapted to the constraints of digital media. However, this does not mean, that an exhibition excludes the actors' ability to monitor and react to each other - it may just be that this happens asynchronously.

A high awareness of the audience, user's tweets can be interpreted as an on-going front stage performance or an exhibition, as Hogan would see it, where the user tries to "(...) maintain positive impressions with the need to seem true or authentic to others." (Marwick

& Boyd, 2010, p. 124). However, it can be argued that Twitter allows us to gain a view into the backstage as well.

Twitter gives us a view of other people's daily rituals and habits, and we are exposed to a candor that used to be impossible in mediated communication. Tweets allow us to obtain a more direct view into some sides of people which were previously only shown in "the backstage", or more likely we get a posed view of the backstage; we are shown what people want us to see (Murthy, 2012, p. 1065). The missing face-to-face interaction and the opportunity that Twitter users can self-elect the content in a tweet makes it relevant to include Meyrowitz further development of Goffman's terms front stage and backstage.

By self-selecting the content in a tweet, users controls what they want to be associated with. This self-control can be seen as an example of what Meyrowitz calls forefront region. Meyrowitz explains that the "(... 'forefront' region behaviour is being develop when performers gain increased isolation from their audience. The new separation of situation allows (...) a more pristine onstage performance." (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 47). A tweet can be compared to user's face, which means that user can use Twitter to create an ideal identity through tweets. In the forefront region, user can entirely control the information visible to the external world, which is why the behaviour can be very different from user's actually identity. The location where user is tweeting from place can be interpreted as the back region. Unless the user behind a tweet is writing about things from his back region, the access to this region is closed.

However, this is in large part dependent on the individual user and their personal use of Twitter, as according to Humphreys, Gill and Krishnamurthy, the tagline for Twitter has changed from its original "What are you doing?" to "What's happening?", which is rather suggesting a move away from personal updates to a service more oriented towards news-information-sharing. This change is proof of Ellison and boyd's (2013) view that social media are in constant flux and develop continuously, which problematizes the field of social media analysis. Even though it can be difficult to determine the audience, Merchant et al. describes that users on social network sites can employ some strategies, which can help users to communicate to an actual audience (Merchant et al., 2013). Marwick and

boyd suggest that users should use public channels (such as Twitter) as if there were private. According to them it is important that we realize that the audience on social media platforms is limitless and therefore we have to get rid of our often bounded behavior, where we think we know who is reading our content. (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Hogan suggests another strategy, which focuses on the lowest common denominator (Hogan, 2010). The point in this strategy is to figure out, if persons who are not the intended audience can understand the message.

Conclusion

In *On Face-Work* (1999), Goffman concludes, "(...) universal human nature is not a very human thing." In the same way, this paper argues that universal tweeting nature is not a very human thing. Due to the technical framework of Twitter, the microblogging site facilitates a form of self-presentation that is very simplistic. Twitter can be said to be stripped of many of the interpersonal mechanisms we as human beings normally employ in our encounters. We don't really know who our audience is, and therefore we are unable to take these into account when tweeting. We have no way of knowing how our audience perceives us and therefore how to keep a trustworthy face to the actual readers, so we may risk putting out a line that is completely inconsistent. Our only way of impacting the image others have of us is by carefully selecting the right words in our tweets that, therefore, become the most important feature of presenting a self on Twitter. Not surprisingly so, maybe.

Throughout this paper, we have discussed the importance of tweets in relation to the self-presentation we portray on Twitter. The tweets are viewed as lines, which arise from the face we perceive ourselves as having and that we hope our audience helps us maintain. Although Twitter users, due to the context collapse and Twitter's general technical framework, don't know who their actual audience is, this paper argues that they still have their imagined audience in mind when tweeting, either subconsciously or deliberately. Through either balance or self-censorship, Twitter user attempts to represent an authentic image of self, which then, in effect, becomes this person's self-presentation on Twitter.

Still, it can be argued whether Twitter's many users are aware of the importance each miniscule tweet has in their everyday use of the social media, which, if more time had been given, could be an interesting aspect to delve deeper into.

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