The Mediation of FaceBook in Identity Expression in the Case of Postgraduate Students of MA Programmes in English Language Teaching at the Higher Institute of Languages at Tishreen University

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□ ABSTRACT □

Over the past few years, social media have pervaded the lives of Syrians in ways that cannot be overlooked and have provided new platforms for action and interaction. This study investigates the effects of such pervasiveness on the expression of identity among the first generations of students of MA programmes in English Language Teaching, in the Higher Institute of Languages, Tishreen University. The article explores whether FaceBook is used for professional purposes, and how its tools and affordances mediate learning and the expression of identity. It particularly highlights the effects of context collapse, impression management, and the social nature of writing on the participants. The research further looks for evidence of digital literacy that the participants demonstrate while using FaceBook.

Keywords: social networking sites, impression management, context collapse, tool mediation, digital literacy, professional identity

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الفيسبوك كوسيط للتعبير عن الهوية في حالة طلاب الدراسات العليا في برامج ماجستير تعليم اللغة الانكليزية في المعهد العالي للغات بجامعة تشرين

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☐ ملخّص ☐

انتشرت في السنوات الأخيرة الماضية وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي في حياة السوريين على نحو لا يمكن تجاهله ووفرت هذه الوسائط منابر جديدة للنشاطات والتفاعل. تتحرى هذه الدراسة تأثيرات هذا الانتشار على التعبير عن الهوية من قبل الدفعات الأولى من برامج ماجستير تعليم اللغة الانكليزية في المعهد العالي للغات في جامعة تشرين. و تبحث المقالة في كيفية استخدام الفيسبوك لأغراض مهنية وكيفية توسط أدواته و خصائصه للتعلم و التعبير عن الهوية. تسلط المقالة الضوء بشكل خاص على أثر انهيارحدود السياق و إدارة الانطباعات والطبيعة الاجتماعية للكتابة على المشاركين في البحث. بالإضافة إلى هذا، يحاول البحث سبر الدلائل على الثقافة الرقمية التي يظهرها المشاركون أثناء استخدامهم الفيسبوك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، إدارة الانطباعات، انهيار حدود السياق، توسط الأدوات، الثقافة الرقمية، الهوية المهنية

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I. Introduction:

Although social networks are ubiquitous and have gained notable currency among Syrian scholars, research into the use of social media by professionals in the Syrian higher educational system is scant. This article particularly investigates how certain FB features -- context collapse, impression management, and social writing-- mediate participants' expression of professional identity. It also looks for evidence of digital literacy practices that participants show in using FB as a forum for identity expression and development.

2. Literature review:

This study is based on two premises: firstly, it views identity construction as the interplay between personal and contextual dimensions. That is, individual agency may be restrained by prevailing social and contextual frames of reference or "sociocultural stereotypes" (Vignoles et al. 2011: 12); and conversely, individual agency may be activated by new affordances and potential for action. Secondly, identities are tool-mediated and positional. As such, it is in line with Vågan's view that a "sociocultural perspective is needed to capture how the incorporation of artifacts provides people with tools of agency and identity; how artifacts mediate, expand, and limit action; and how they work as tools for individual's identities in cultural worlds" (2011: 45).

The above gives rise to the question of whether the defining features of social networking sites (SNSs) empower individual agency and professional development. This article starts with a definition of SNSs and then proceeds to review tools and features of FaceBook (FB) that mediate the expression of identity, before finally reporting the current research which explores the use of FaceBook by postgraduate students of MA programmes in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the Higher Institute of Languages, Tishreen University.

2.1. Social Networking Sites (SNSs) - Definition:

Social networking sites are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008: 211). FB was chosen as the context of this research since the target participants all had FB accounts. The next paragraph, therefore, outlines some FB tools and affordances that may impact the expression of identity: context collapse, mediated interactions and impression management, and the social nature of writing.

2.2. Context Collapse:

Context collapse is defined as "the process through which various connections representing different aspects of one's identity are flattened into a uniform, one-dimensional group" (The Government Office for Science, 2013: 8). Collapse, in this sense, refers to "the overlapping of role identities through the intermingling of distinct networks" (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014: 477). On FB, for instance, a user may have colleagues, bosses, family members, friends and potential friends all listed as online friends. The context of FB overarches personal and professional spheres whose boundaries are more concrete offline. It is true that FB presents "opportunities for members to organize themselves into groups in relation to personal and professional affiliations, which might include educational affiliations (such as schools), workplaces, interests, hobbies, and political and religious beliefs" (Aydin, 2012: 194). However, blurring the boundaries between the user's personal and professional spaces and contacts is still seen to impact the intentionality of self-presentation and to compromise spontaneity. Research shows that the heterogeneity of

audience and networks activates strategies for expressing appropriate self-image (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018). Context collapse is then one aspect of communication via FB that has been intimately linked to mediated self-expression. Another FB property that has enabled "impression management" is the asynchronous text-based nature of interaction.

2.3. Mediated Interactions and Impression Management:

In a nutshell, text-based computer-mediated interactions are stripped of body language and are time-delayed or asynchronous. Filtered facial clues and the affordance of time-delayed interactions can encourage mediated self-presentations or "impression management" (Goffman, 1959), where individuals manage identities consciously or unconsciously to influence the perceptions or impressions formed by others. Mediation can take on many forms: photo editing, text editing, and reflecting before posting, among others.

2.4. The Social Nature of Writing:

Blogging on FB is social, in essence. While Word Processor is the writing tool of the cognitive era, blogging is the writing medium of the sociocognitive era. Social media have re-defined the concept of authorship in terms of quantity and quality: the number of writers or bloggers has increased and the circle of audience has widened. Writing on FB invites both intentional and accidental audience, including potential employers (Warschaur, 2010: 3-4). As Ware puts it, blogs enable "generating new discourse structures and norms through new technologies" (2017: 266). Linguistic style variability is one dimension of context collapse. Gil-Lopez et al. conclude that wider audience invites a "one-size fits all" strategy of impression management where posts tend to be universally appropriate in terms of linguistic content and style (2018: 139).

2.5. The Social Web and the Importance of Media Literacy:

Reading and writing printed information have become an obsolete notion of literacy surpassed by multidimensional/multimodal version of it. In today's media-saturated society, visual, audio, digital and textual information is in a state of constant streaming. At the same time, intuitive tools for media production and media sharing, rather than only consumption, are at the device of the ordinary user. The web is replete with generic publishing forums such as YouTube, FaceBook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, among many others where no expert knowledge is necessary to post information in its multiple modes (Koltay, 2011).

The move from the read-only first-generation web 1.0 and its designer-generated content to the social read-write web 2.0 and its user-generated content reflects such reality. In Kaplan and Haenlein's words, the term social media refers to " a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (2010: 61). Here surfaces the question of whether the MA students practice the digital literacy skills needed to deal with information, in its diverse modes, on FB. This question, together with questions related to the mediation of FB tools and affordances, forms the basis of this study as will be detailed next.

3. The Research Methodology

3.1 The Research Questions:

1. Do postgraduate students of the MA programmes in ELT at the Higher Institute of Languages use FaceBook for learning purposes?
2. If so, how do FB tools and affordances mediate their self-expression and learning?
3. If not, what inhibits them from doing so?
3. What levels of literacy do they show when using such tools?
The final question will be answered throughout the discussion of tool mediation, too.

3.2. The Sample:

A fixed purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012: 418) was used in this study as the participants were approached in view of the relevance of their experiences to the research questions posed. In other words, this study is participant-focused in the sense that recruitment of postgraduate students of MA programmes in ELT was planned to highlight this particular group's use of FaceBook: personal, professional or both. The fact that the participants represent the first generations to take an MA in ELT in the Higher Institute of Languages was the springboard for their selection. All participants are part-time teachers of general English and/or ESP (English for Specific Purposes). They are four males and six females. At the time of conducting the study, all participants had used FaceBook for a year at least: their use ranged from one year to seven years, which makes it safe to assume that they were all reasonably familiar with FB's available tools.

3.3. Data Collection Tool:

An open-ended questionnaire (Appendix I) was sent to the ten participants to complete and return at their convenience. The main rationale beyond choosing a questionnaire as a data collection tool was to allow the respondents enough time to reflect on their answers so that they could edit them whenever they wanted to add more information. The aim was to collect rich, yet respondent-paced data. Additionally, the questionnaire allowed the participants to refer to FB pages by copying a link that they wanted to use to support their replies. The questions are open-ended due to the novelty of the topic explored and the researcher's interest in respondent-generated codes. The research focused on those FaceBook tools and features that are of salient significance for the participants. All questionnaires were returned electronically and in English, which has saved transcription and translation time. This has also made it easier to look for key words and frequencies using AntConc although the majority of analysis was carried out qualitatively.

3.4. Data Analysis:

The analysis method adopted in this study is the framework approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is succinctly described by Braun and Clarke as a method of producing a minimal yet rich description of data (2006). Smith and Firth define it as "an interpretive process, whereby data is systematically searched to identify patterns within the data in order to provide an illuminating description of the phenomenon" (2011: 54). They further suggest that the framework approach has a lot in common with thematic analysis, yet it provides more detailed, transparent and rigorous process of analysis. The framework approach is not, however, apt for handling data that is too heterogeneous to be categorized (Gale et al., 2013). It is simply a systematic method of organizing qualitative data so as to enable interpretation.

The first stage of analysis involved a thorough reading of respondents' answers and generating in-house codes and categories. A code is "a descriptive or conceptual label that is assigned to excerpts of raw data"; a category is a cluster of codes that have some ideas in common (*ibid.,* 2013). The second stage was defining the themes of interest. Generally speaking, a theme is an interpretation of relationships between categories formulated by the analyst. A theme relates to the research questions and constitutes a building block of the final research findings (Bryman, 2012; Gale, 2013). In this study, the theme of interest is the mediation of FaceBook as a platform for self-expression and learning. The subthemes of interest are FB tools and features that can create a learning curve, the perceived utility of such tools in learning and self-expression, and evidence of participants' literacy in utilizing or harnessing such tools.

4. Discussion:

As gleaned from the data, FaceBook has created inroads into an otherwise inaccessible world. Most participants reported the use of FB for personal, academic and professional purposes at the same time. Although other social networking sites are renowned for promoting a professional profile; for instance, LinkedIn is described as "professional matchmaker" (Van Dijck 2013: 207), the data shows that FB was heavily used for professional growth. It may be that the intuitive interface features that FB offers attracted users, personal and professional alike.

4.1. Context Collapse:

4.1.1. Intercultural Interaction:

On FB, contexts are not demarcated automatically, and by extension, neither are countries nor cultures. In this study, context collapse took on positive dimensions as it implied cross-cultural and intra-cultural interactions evident in the participants' reference to the wider context as a source of learning and knowledge transfer. Communicating for authentic purposes is what makes online spaces afford "interactive possibilities that are inherently social" (Meskill & Quah, 2013: 43). FB was viewed as a platform for connectivity. As such, context collapse has appeared not to be a restriction, but rather an affordance of FaceBook. Indeed, "communicating with multiple audiences across geographic, linguistic, and cultural lines; establishing new identities, relationships, and social affiliations in online communities" are all practices that reflect literacy in using social networks (Ware, 2017: 266).

4.1.2. Organised Interaction:

Communicating for professional and academic purposes was one valuable affordance of FB for participants:

[Groups] were of great benefit for my study when discussing with colleagues and teachers, communicating with my students of Tishreen university and as a work group in my translation volunteering at the Syrian Researchers (suggesting an article link, discussing it, attaching the file of translation then commenting the proofread version of it. (Student 5)

Instant upload and download of resources, collective feedback and collective intelligence were all merits of FB-mediated communications noted by this participant and echoed by others, as will be later exemplified.

4.1.3. Controlled Interaction:

Despite an overwhelming interest in two-way interactions, participants sometimes controlled the desired amount of interaction. The *follow* function was used as an example of controlled connectivity, one-way topic-specific interaction, where the participant was more interested in the reception of information about a particular topic than in mutual exchange:

I followed many artists to know their latest and some people whose posts I find inspiring but I wouldn't want to know or talk to them any further. (Student 5)

4.1.4. Branding:

Context collapse also enabled "branding" in front of prospective employers. Van Dijck describes current practices of self-expression as 'an art' that aims at "professional self-promotion" (2013: 200). Self-promotion here included display of skills as well as noticing opportunities. When asked about the activities that FB enables in a way that other contexts do not, student 5 explained:

I wouldn't be able to know about some art competitions or galleries without it. I wouldn't be able to share my art.

The same student also expressed an interest in pages that offer a range of benefits including "*opportunities in work, study, and personal development*". Likewise, student 4 states:

..when there is a job opportunity on a page I have I just share it with my friends

4.1.5. Sharing:

The data also reveals that the *share* button was more often used than the *comment* function. One explanation for the popularity of sharing surfaced in the data:

Sharing is [a] good way to use other people's words without stealing them (student 4)

The participant here demonstrated awareness of the notion of plagiarism on FB. Student1 similarly initially used FB as a means of contacting professors and colleagues and later discovered its potential for knowledge-transfer, without losing sight of the possible lack of credibility of information:

I found that Facebook could have a tremendous role in knowledge transfer. It introduces users to others' culture despite the uncertainty of the information which means there is no censorship on this information to check its credibility.

The excerpts above are instances of "information literacy" summarized as the ability to locate, use, and critically evaluate the authenticity, credibility and relevance of information (Koltay, 2011: 215).

Table 1 illustrates the process of generating the theme context collapse in the light of the framework approach to thematic analysis.

(Table 1: an example of thematic analysis: coding and theme generation)

Theme	Subtheme(s)			Respondent's words/quote	Respondent number
Context collapse as virtual boundary crossing	tool	Evidence of literacy	positive or negative		
	Newsfeed		positive		1
	Contact with people from other cultures		Positive (Intercultural learning and knowledge transfer)		2
	Creating groups and pages	Setting virtual boundaries and segmenting audience	Positive	Groups: "Professional: I have a FB group including students I teach at the faculty of ---------. It simplifies many things for me and for them(communication is easier and direct, pdfs downloads, experimenting with writing …)"	3
	Befriending foreign language teachers and natives	Control of what is being shared; Awareness of customization option			4
		Control of what is being shared: Using the *follow* option to		"It's great because the follower and the followed mutually understand that	5

		maintain some formality : defined interaction		they aren't sharing all of them and both don't any further and may be bothering interaction."	
		Selectivity: reading information about other users before adding them			9

As demonstrated above, at the forefront of the perceived affordances of FB is enabling and facilitating access: access to other cultures, to native speakers of English, and to foreign language teachers. This is in line with the literature that underlines the potential of learning through computer-mediated communications (CMCs), an example of which is networks: FB is not simply a tool for communication. Rather, it is an environment where opportunities of learning are "inherently present, especially in situations in which learners need to engage in negotiation of meaning with native speakers of the target language or even with peers of non-native proficiency" (Beatty, 2010: 69).

4.2. Mediated Interactions and Impression Management:

In answer to the question of whether FB is a detached-from-reality or an extension-to-reality medium of self-expression, only one participant viewed it as categorically detached from reality as users can assume personalities and express ideas that are contradictory to their own. In contrast, student 1 pointed out that while users can have 'pseudonyms', they do so in order to express their real selves freely considering FB as an arena *"where you do what you cannot do in reality"*. Student 10 similarly refers to those who might feel socially excluded in face-to-face situations and find in FB a less inhibiting context where they do not feel judged or humiliated.

All in all, most participants viewed FB either as an extension of reality, or as an extension and detachment at the same time. Those who considered virtual presentations of the self as a reflection of reality rationalized that personality clues crystallize through the *"comments people leave, the type of posts they post, and their posture in their personal photos"* (Student 2). Such presentations are just one piece of the jigsaw. For student 5, the real identity is the "ideology" expressed by bloggers; appearance was not mentioned. Interestingly too, FB is deemed an outlet for the social self, a revelation of the personal side of colleagues:

For me as an MA student, FB did not only help me in sharing/discussing information with my colleagues, but it also helped me to know them better as human being. I was able to know about their preferences, personal thoughts and beliefs. (Student 10)

This resonates with Boyd and Ellison's conclusion that FB may well serve to "solidify offline connections as opposed to meeting new people" (2007: 221).

4.3. The Social Nature of Writing:

For some participants, blogging is an exercise that sharpens the writing skill. For student 1, "*if you practice blogging on Facebook, this would enhance your writing proficiency*". Student 3 underlines the "*experimenting with writing*" as unique to blogging. For student 8, developing a sense of voice and ownership on FB - publishing poems and receiving immediate feedback -- are the two activities that have made FB blogging unique. However, not all participants were interested in the social nature of writing on FaceBook as student 5 explains. To her, the durable nature of writing on FB makes it an apt medium of documenting her life events without necessarily sharing them:

Facebook is a virtual diary for me where I mark events or ideas in my life (usually first time in doing anything)because I'm grounded in the moment and tend to forget a lot about happy moments, I like reviewing that and the posts I posted years ago. I sometimes post to myself without sharing it with anyone. I hate oversharing but I like to exist online.

Increasing or decreasing the frequency of posting status updates when the user's network is heterogeneous or large is considered as an impression management tool (Gil-Lopez et al. 2018:138). In their study, the diversity of audience did not curtail the participants' revelations of the public self through making ample reference to content words and first-person pronouns (*ibid.*, 138). In this study, student 5 considered the *only-me* posting option as a tool for documenting an honest personal disclosure, a solo activity that is not related to the size and nature of her network.

4.4. Other Aspects of Literacy Demonstrated by Participants:

One research question that posed itself strongly here was whether or not the participants viewed interaction deeper than the interface and showed any awareness of the infrastructure and implications beyond the direct use of tools. This is especially important given what Van Dijck referred to as "monetized" "imposed connectivity and narrativity" and their potential influence on online identities (2013: 200).

Indeed, the affordances of FB and its potential of learning call for the development of new literacy skills and practices on the part of the user. As Ware succinctly puts it, affordances are "properties in the environment that are purposefully made relevant and meaningful by users only through their conscious choices to take up a resource—to use it, discard it, change it, or repurpose it" (2017: 266). As previously mentioned, participants in this study demonstrated such literacy. Other aspects included were:

4.4.1. Setting Virtual Boundaries and Segmenting Audiences

Setting virtual boundaries was for purposes of data protection through the 'edit privacy' button and customization of privacy settings:

"What distinguishes FaceBook from other programs (at least the ones I know and use) is that it gives it's users the ability to send and share all kind of files with the maximum level of privacy protection". (Student 4)

Setting virtual boundaries was also evident in creating pages and groups in order to self-tailor presentations of identity. Student 3 refers to the convenience of downloading articles, the ease of communication and as benefits of a group she created for her ESP students. Student 10 specifies the ease of managing FB groups as opposed to groups on other applications:

For example, FB groups could only permit posting to admins and leave commenting to other regular users. However, in WhatsApp groups, there would be so many messages and my announcements would get lost and might not be seen by everyone in the group.

Participants also collectively created a page, which has enhanced the sense of belonging to the MA academic community and encouraged contribution to it:

This page was created by my friend L. She puts useful information on it and sharesbooks which are related to our MA study. This helps us a lot on our study. Moreover, if we find any relevant books or articles, we send them to her and she posts them on the page, too. (*Student 6*)

It is noteworthy that while the page is created by a student of the MA in Specialization and Qualification, it has attracted students of MA in Language and ELT.

FB here brought together dispersed students of the two MA programmes in a more efficient way that the brick-and-mortar classes did. The above is also evidence of critical production of information as opposed to mere consumption.

4.4.2. Exploiting Multimodality for Self-Expression and Learning:

Some participants expressed themselves "visually" through selecting images that reflect their personalities. In face-to-face interactions, such affordance of multimodal expression is not possible: "*I post photos of my art or photography or anything designed before but states an idea visually regarding the cover photo I make sure that it suits my profile photo in colors. I don't change that so often but I think it conveys a message about me through my public profile"* (Student 5).

Likewise, student 4 updates his status by sharing songs, other participants reported self-learning from the videos that friends share on FB (Student 6).

5. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research:

Overall, this small-scale research has demonstrated that the use of FaceBook has created new opportunities for postgraduate students to communicate professionally, express their thoughts and personalities, interact in a self-tailored manner, and above all to develop a number of digital literacy skills, intuitively. The significance of this study lies in exploring the under-investigated concept of digital literacy in relation to self-presentation that is mediated by FB tools. What is needed is a more systematic proposal for enhancing prospective students' and teachers' digital literacy skills in order to fully harness and utilize the educational power of FaceBook and other Social Networks in the educational arena. Future research can also shed light on the influence of FB-mediated self-presentations on specific aspects of the professional identity such as linguistic performance, cultural learning and emotional self-disclosure.

Appendix I: The Research Instrument: an Open-ended Questionnaire

This research looks into Syrian EFL teachers/MA students' expression of identity using Social Networking Sites, especially FaceBook (FB).

You are kindly requested to answer the following questions, adding any other information that you find relevant. Your participation is highly appreciated.

1. When did you create your FB account? Who/What encouraged you to do so?
2. What FB features (e.g. status updates/blogging, profile cover and photos, groups, follow, pages, likes/sharing/commenting) do you use. How often do you use them?

Feature	How often?

3. Why do you use such features

Feature	Purpose (professional, personal, other): please specify

4. Does FB enable you to do any activities that are not possible without using it? Please explain?

5. Are there any links/posts that you find particularly interesting and would like to share here to illustrate any of the points above?

6. Some find FB detached from reality; others find it an extension to it (a space or an arena to express oneself). What is your own opinion?

Thank you for your co-operation

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