Chapter 7

Sociability in Social Network Sites:
Facebook as Trial Platform for Social Behavioral Patterns

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the potential of social network sites (SNS) as sources for both social feedback and trial platforms for social behavioral patterns. With the findings of an online survey and 40 qualitative interviews of Facebook users, this chapter analyzes how social network sites are used for “communicative self-presentation” and how users provoke and handle positive as well as negative social reactions from other users that become part of their own identity presentations in the online network. Finally, the combination of studies shows that social feedback is not only one of the main motives for using SNS, but can also cause self-reflection processes in users. Additionally, it appears that men and women handle social feedback on SNS quite differently.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, social networks were characterized by a diffuse and unseizable nature, a fact that has changed completely since the rapid increase of SNS on the internet. On these virtual platforms, users’ social relationship structures are manifested and become an integral part of users’ self-presentations in the network. Therefore, it is not surprising that SNS have become a “social space” for more than 600 million Facebook users from all over the world. In what way do the online visualized relationship networks correspond with relationship structures in reality, and in what way...
do different identity facets and behavioral patterns in social relationship maintenance appear in the virtual environment compared to those in real life? These questions will be answered within this chapter by using the results of qualitative and quantitative surveys of Facebook users.

As an introduction, we start with an analysis of the main motives for using SNS like Facebook. It will be shown that SNS are used primarily for social reasons, especially the reactivation of former relationships and the fostering of existing relationships. In contrast, socializing with unknown people does not happen frequently on SNS but occurs rather often in real life.

Based on these initial findings of the survey that identify the maintenance of social contacts as the main motive for Facebook use, the question arises of how relationship-fostering really transpires on SNS. In what way can these online contacts be seen as sources of social feedback that form an important aspect of online and offline identity construction? Can gender-specific differences be observed in using Facebook as a channel for social feedback?

To answer these questions, usage habits of SNS are analyzed. It appears that interaction via the online social network is characterized by a merging of communication, information, and self-presentation, a characteristic that will be summarized in the chapter as “communicative self-presentation.” Using the status message tool in Facebook as an example, it will be illustrated how certain features of Facebook can be used for communicative self-presentation. Furthermore, the analysis shows the dominance of personality-oriented messages that express either current activities or intimate feelings of the user. A variety of qualitative interviews with Facebook users reveals that the majority of status messages are published not just for the sake of publication itself but with a strong intention to provoke reactions and social feedback from other people. Thus, the online social network becomes a more or less protected trial platform for certain behavioral patterns, attitudes, and opinions (Döring, 2003; McKenna et al., 2002; Schachtner, 2008; Steinfield et al., 2008). As will be shown later in this chapter, the expectation of social feedback in response to publications forms one of the most important motivators for actively using the network (Ibrahim, 2009; Kollok, 1999; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Young, 2010).

Finally, based on these findings of the high significance of social feedback processes on SNS, we look at the question of how negative social reactions to publications and activities in the network are experienced and in the different ways men and women handle such negative feedback.

**BACKGROUND**

**SNS: Both a Blessing and a Curse for Social Relationships?**

The importance for social change that SNS have can be seen quite evidently in the statistics of the largest social network, Facebook. As of January 2011, Facebook has more than 600 million users who, on average, spend more than 700 billion minutes per month on the online social network (Facebook statistics, January 2011). Hence, Facebook is used intensively by an incredibly large group of people for networking and most of them see the internet as a “social space” where their social interactions take place to a bigger and bigger extent (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 71). It is not surprising that the question arises how these forms of online-based networking can affect real-life social relationships and the individual identity construction process.

Opinions about that question are quite different. They range from technical critical views that fear the isolation and the loss of sense of reality of the users (Kraut et al., 1998) and describe computer-mediated communication as poor environments because of the lack of nonverbal cues (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Kiesler, Siegal, McGuire, 1984; Mesch & Talmud, 2006; van Dijk, 1999)
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