Chapter 8

Faculty Users on Facebook: What We Can Learn from Women Academics–Mothers’ Rhetorical Methods for Visual Self-Presentation Online

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ABSTRACT

Within the rhetorical spaces of the physical institution and the online realm of Facebook, faculty must negotiate community norms and expectations when self-presenting to their audiences. Given the pervasiveness of Facebook and the commonplace intersection of personal and professional audiences on this site, faculty users need to carefully consider how they construct their online identities, particularly in terms of their visual self-presentation through the profile picture. This chapter presents data from a survey that explores the rhetorical approaches of one group of Facebook users, women academics who are also mothers. Participant responses reveal that a majority of these users demonstrate audience awareness and a deliberate rhetorical process when visually self-presenting on Facebook. The insight garnered from this survey can assist faculty Facebook users, both men and women, in thinking more critically about how they navigate the rhetorical landscape of this site when visually self-presenting to their own audiences.

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INTRODUCTION

With its wide ranging rhetorical contexts, Facebook no longer functions simply as an Internet playground where users can freely experiment with their identities without considering the potential ripple effect of their rhetorical choices. In 1995, Turkle discussed the user tendency “to take things at interface value” and claimed “we are moving toward a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real” (p. 23). Her more recent work (Turkle, 2011) builds on the theory that people’s online lives are representational and simulated, asserting that “real life provides little space for consequence-free identity play” unlike the online realms of social networking sites and gaming forums (p. 193). Arguably, however, there is no real self versus a digital self, and the idea that our online and offline selves are separate has been contested (Baym, 2010; Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002). Baym (2002) asserts that the notion of the online and offline constituting “separate realms does not hold up to scrutiny” and that the ways in which users communicate and connect with one another online “can only be understood as deeply embed in and influenced by the daily realities of embodied life (Baym, 2010, p. 152). She acknowledges that certain online forums may facilitate fantastical or fictitious self-presentation without directly affecting users’ selves offline, but that “on close examination, even there the lines bleed” and “false identities…are exceptions, not the norm” (Baym, 2010, p. 152). This is not to say users do not construct versions of themselves online (and offline), which reflect different performances of self based on how they perceive various online rhetorical spaces and situations. But, although these constructions/performances may be different, they do not necessarily exist separately from one another or from users’ offline identities. As such, the rhetorical and performative approaches to curating one’s online identity(ies) potentially present far-reaching effects that constitute one’s offline persona, as it is questionable the extent to which we can separate or conflate our digital selves from or with a more “real” self existing in the more “real” spaces of our physical lives. In a networked culture where identity collapses between the digital and the physical and boundaries between public and private are increasingly blurred, faculty and administrators must make critical and professionally influential choices when constructing their online identities, especially on pervasive social networking sites such as Facebook where their personal lives potentially intersect with and impact their academic/professional selves (and vice versa).

To this effect, the overarching aim of this chapter is to examine the extent to which the digital personas of women academics who are mothers intersect with, act upon, and reflect the identities they project in the physical space of the institution. While Facebook allows for multimodal (i.e., linguistic, visual, and/or aural modes of communication) self-presentation, of particular interest is the visual rhetoric of women academics who construct an identity on Facebook by self-presenting (or not) through mother-child images and what informs their rhetorical decisions about how they merge their personal and professional lives in this digital space. How do women academics who are mothers define their purposes for using Facebook? Who are their audiences, and how do they consider these audiences when choosing how to visually self-present in this space? Do they negotiate institutional perceptions of motherhood and scholarly identity when visually self-presenting on Facebook? What can faculty users, men and women alike, learn from the rhetorical strategies of these users? This chapter attempts to shed light on these questions by considering the responses of women academics-mothers who participated in a study designed to understand their rhetorical methods for visual self-presentation on Facebook; the degree to which institutional expectations and attitudes about motherhood influence their online rhetorical choices when visually self-presenting;
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