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AUTHOR: Mariza Georgalou

TITLE: Discourse and Identity on Facebook

SERIES TITLE: Bloomsbury Discourse

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SUMMARY

The growing popularity of computer mediated communication (CMC), as shown in mushrooming digital technologies available for the public, has brought a unique challenge for researchers: new, emerging online practices are taken for granted so quickly that when they have been sufficiently incorporated into teaching and research, a sense of datedness is almost inevitable. As such, the merit of CMC research often hinges on whether a study can “capture the moment”, revealing the deeper social-cultural dynamics that will exist beyond digital infrastructure. In this regard, “Discourse and identity on Facebook” offers an insightful

exploration into online identity construction and performance. It adds another welcoming volume to the widely-circulated Bloomsbury Discourse Series. The central focus of the volume is how Facebook, as a vibrant socio-cultural arena, mediates online identity manifestations. Based on a detailed longitudinal online ethnography of five Greek Facebook users, it convincingly demonstrates the diversity and complexity of online identity formation.

To begin with, Chapters 1–3 outline the theoretical and methodological dimensions of the volume. Chapter 1 “Introduction” initiates the discussion with a techno-autobiography of a typical day of the author, which illustrates the extent to which digital technologies have been domesticated in daily life. The chapter then discusses the importance of studying identity on Facebook, arguing that online identity is essentially realized through textual practices and that the affordance of self-presentative opportunities offered by Facebook allow users to consciously play around their identities through the interplay of language and other semiotic means. In continuing this line of argument, Chapter 2 “Identity, discourse and Facebook” reviews key theories of identity and discourse. According to the author, identity theories can be grouped into either essentialist or constructivist perspectives, depending on whether identity is regarded as an absolute and invariant aspect of selfhood. Following the constructivist perspective, the current volume considers identity as a dynamic, flexible, and contextual attribute that is actively and constantly produced and reproduced by discourse. As “the representation of one’s persona in a digital context” (p. 13), online identity presents the latest dimension of identity formation, as the digital arena’s openness, social interactivity, and accessibility have been dramatically enhanced by Web 2.0. Chapter 3 moves to the topic of online ethnography and discusses the method’s key principles. Given its discourse-centered nature, the reported study combined both screen-based and participant-based dimensions by juxtaposing textual analysis of Facebook data and direct interactions with the research participants. The chapter also describes the reported study’s five Greek participants, whose bibliographic details are provided in preparation for the detailed, in-depth discourse analyses in upcoming chapters.

Chapters 4–8 examine five topical issues and how they are influenced by Facebook’s multimodal environment: place, time, profession and education, stance-taking, and privacy. Chapter 4 “Place and identity on Facebook” explores a fundamental constituent of our everyday being: the places we are attached to. As all participants in the current study are frequent travellers across Europe, their Facebook posts constitute multiple-placed identities, in which place marking in profile information and posts (often accompanied by photos) becomes an essential part of the participants’ identity construction practices. Place marking in these participants’ posts visualized their footprints, their hobbies, their socio-political opinions, and so on. Places, as the author argues, are not simply references, they are adopted in the digital space as a symbolic resource for self-expression online. Chapter 5 “Time, age and identity on Facebook” continues the discussion by focusing on temporality, another fundamental constituent of everyday being. The central question explored here is how Facebook users position themselves vis-à-vis time. The expression of temporality on Facebook is constrained by the platform’s digital structure in two notable ways: first, Facebook is present-oriented, encouraging the celebration of the moment; and second, Facebook interactions are inherently asynchronous, allowing the recording of life. As such, references to time on Facebook simultaneously serve two purposes: they usually begin as expressions concerning the cyclical nature of everyday life or important life moments (e.g. birthday, or upcoming graduation day), but later they turn into building blocks for an interactive, co-authored digital memory bank of one’s online self-continuum. As facilitated by the digital environment, narratives contributing to time and age identities tend to be interactional and collaborative. Chapter 6 “Professional and educational identity on Facebook” attends to the ways in which Facebook mediates the construction and display of educational and professional identities. As many people use Facebook for both personal and professional purposes, they are forced to handle different groups of audiences in one single timeline. Referring to this paradox as context collapse, the chapter demonstrates its pervasiveness in the participants’ online activities, such as

claiming expertise, self-promotion, complaining about fatigue from work, and so on. Besides functioning as an interactive digital depository of activities, Facebook offers a space for the display and confluence of one's different educational and professional identities. Chapter 7 considers the issue of stance-taking, especially how Facebook affords diversified ways for its users to communicate their feelings, thoughts, opinions, and evaluations, often with the assistance of multimodal materials. The generic context of Facebook often makes stance-taking more straightforward among connected users. As the reported study was conducted during Greece's financial crisis, the participants used Facebook as a venue for making expressive statements. The chapter suggests that these online gestures, despite being small and fragmented, should not be ignored as they exemplify the digitization of political actions. Chapter 8 discusses privacy, the opposite side of online presence. It returns to the topic of context collapse and illustrates the pressure many Facebook users experience when shielding their personal information from undesired or unknown audiences. The chapter also explicates a fundamental contradiction embedded in online identity formation: the process is built upon publicness and disclosure, yet the ambiguity of Facebook, as it can be a private, semi-public, or public space, makes self-disclosure a challenging task.

Chapter 9 "Conclusion" summarizes the whole volume by synthesizing the key insights drawn from previous chapters' empirical analyses. Overall, the chapter argues that Facebook brings three major changes to identity discourse. First, the most common way identity is embedded into texts is through I-marked utterances. As Facebook is designed for such expressions, it provides an ideal breeding ground for users to claim a sense of self, express affiliation or disaffiliation with specific social groups or public opinions, and index themselves within the sociocultural milieu. Second, one's online identity also emerges from his/her interactions with other Facebook users. Through simple actions such as sharing and liking, users are confirming each other's stance-making practices. More complex practices such as online debates also generate the same effect. Third, multimodal communication becomes a prominent feature of online identity performance. Although people still rely on words to express their opinions and feelings, Facebook's digital environment has effectively guided users to exploit a variety of semiotic means to articulate facets of their identities more forcefully and creatively.

EVALUATION

Built upon vivid examples drawn from a detailed online ethnography, "Discourse and identity on Facebook" provides a comprehensive and in-depth examination of identity expressions on Facebook. The personal resonance shown in its ethnographic approach is impressive, and many readers will probably find themselves doing the same activities in their everyday online presence. The volume is at its strongest when it discusses the issue of context collapse and the interactive and collaborative online space created by Facebook. It also outlines the multifaceted nature of identity construction, and such complexity is well demonstrated throughout the empirical analyses in Chapters 4-8. At the end of each chapter, the author has provided related class activities and useful resources, which would benefit novice discourse analysts. The volume is without doubt a very valuable reference for researchers who are interested in examining booming online discourses through qualitative methods.

My main criticism, though, would be the way in which Chapters 4-8 present their main arguments. The extensive use of quotes from the research data in each chapter occasionally interrupts the argumentative flow and some readers may find the analysis too descriptive. To some extent, such emphasis on discourse examples obscures the theoretical discussions on Facebook's mediation of identity manifestations. In addition, the volume would have benefited from a deeper inquiry into the economic, political, and socio-cultural backgrounds of Greece. Readers without sufficient knowledge of Europe may question some interpretations in Chapters 4-8 since many quotes analyzed there are context-specific. Although the author intends to appeal to a wider readership by including related class activities and useful resources at

the end of each chapter, the inherent specificity of the reported study (an ethnography based on only five Facebook users from Greece) would potentially dissuade some instructors from using the book as a course reading.

All that being said, the book remains a valuable reading for anyone interested in computer mediated communication, and its attention to identity and daily expressions online would resonate strongly with the readers.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Sibo Chen is SSHRC Vanier Doctoral Fellow in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. His major research interests are language and communication, critical discourse analysis, and genre theories.

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