

## GENDERING ON FACEBOOK: A STUDY OF GENDERED SELF REPRESENTATION ON FACEBOOK

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the awareness of gendered self representation of Indian users on the Social Networking Site (SNS) Facebook. The attempt is to see if online behaviour of Facebook users is regulated by offline gender norms and if social expectations and cultural values control the online behaviour of the users. A questionnaire method was employed to examine Facebook communication behaviour by the users. Data were gathered from 675 SNS users of 20-21 year age group. Results show that users are aware of being gendered through the process of socialization. They know that self representation on SNS is regulated by offline gender norms.

**Keywords:** Facebook, gender norms, self-representation, socialization

**Introduction:** Social media, especially social networking sites (SNSs), provides scope for investigating gendered and sexual identities. Social media and digital communication technologies have radically transformed our ideas of gender and sexuality. Some scholars argue that social media offers opportunities for a democratic representation of the self. They say that the strict surveillance of physical space has been weakened in this virtual space. These liberatory claims are problematized by many scholars who are of the opinion that self representation on SNSs is governed by offline gender norms. They argue that cyberspace reiterates offline conventions of gender and sexuality.

Facebook is an SNS service launched on 4 February 2004, by Mark Zuckerberg and his friends. Presently headquartered in Melano Park, California, it actually started as an SNS limited to Harvard University students. Since 2006, anyone aged 13 years or above is allowed to be a registered user of the website. *The Times of India* recently reported that Facebook has 1.71 billion users as of 30 June 2016 and India is noted to provide a promising user base [1]. India is the second highest populated country in the world. The Number of people using SNS in India is growing fast. *The Hindu* recently reported that the number of Facebook users in India has crossed hundred million [2]. This, without any doubt, is one of the biggest SNS users group in the world.

**Theoretical Background:** Gendering is a constant process both in offline as well as online space. Self representation even online is regulated by offline gender norms. V.Geetha in the preface to her book 'Gender' writes, "Gender is everywhere. When we dress a girl child in soft colors and frilly clothes, buy a male child a gun, when we admonish girls for behaving like boys, or tease boys for being timid like girls, we are 'doing' gender." [3] Society constructs a definite set of roles for men and women. Individuals are schooled and socialized into these expectations of society. Generally people do not challenge these

given roles because it is naturalized and deeply ingrained.

Xuan Zhao et al., in the study titled, 'The Many Faces of Facebook: Experiencing Social Media as Performance, Exhibition, and Personal Archive' examine why and how Facebook users manage their data on their Facebook profile page [4]. The study states that Facebook users use the SNS space as three different functional regions, "...a *performance region* for managing recent data and impression management, an *exhibition region* for longer term presentation of self-image, and a *personal region* for archiving meaningful facets of life." But the data management in all these three regions is regulated by offline social norms. The kind of image to be maintained, stored and revisited on the SNS page is decided by certain social expectations and cultural values. Susan C. Herring and SanjaKapidzic, in the study 'Teens, Gender, and Self Presentation in Social Media' state that gender plays a very important role in self representation on SNSs like Facebook and online communication behavior differs depending on users' gender [5].

**Methodology:** This paper followed Questionnaire survey method to elicit feedback on gendered self representation on Facebook. A total of 62 students administered the survey to a total of 613 students of NMAM Institute of Technology, Karnataka. All these 675 participants were Bachelor of Engineering students. Among them 459 were male and 216 were female. The gender ratio of this study group was commensurate with the gender ratio of the students studying in the college in the academic year 2014-15. Total number of students in the college studying in the bachelor degree course is 4502 in which 67% are male students and 33% are female students. The total respondents to the survey are 675 in which 68% are men and 32% are women. These students have come from various parts of India. Most of the respondents come from Udupi, South Canara, Shimoga and Coorg districts of Karnataka state. About 15% of the

respondents come from Delhi, Maharashtra and Bihar states of India.

We chose to focus on Facebook based on the popularity of the site. In order to avoid dormant users, the respondents were chosen from those users who are active on Facebook and have a minimum of five friends on Facebook. The survey questionnaire had fifteen questions. The first three questions were on the frequency and purpose of the use of Facebook and the other SNSs. The rest of the questions elicited information on the knowledge of mainstream social norms regulating gendered self representation and its influence on the self representation on Facebook.

**Results and Discussion:** Mainstream Indian society follows male centered gender norms. Except for a few debates here and there about gender equality, Indian society has remained male dominant. Man is believed to be the main gender in the system. Women are expected to be subservient to men in all spheres of life. During the pre-survey discussions some of the participants discussed the male centered pattern of gender norms in Indian society. But fundamental problem of why woman is considered a weaker gender requiring the protection of man was hardly a matter of discussion.

The female respondents during the discussion expressed that they are very careful in uploading their photos and videos on their Facebook profile as they are career oriented. They believe that their prospective employers would look into their SNS profile for details on their offline life. They do not wish to 'spoil' their 'image' and create a bad 'impression' about themselves. When they were asked what they mean by image and impression, they said they need to follow a socially accepted set of norms for their self-representation on the Facebook profile too.

Irrespective of gender, 86% of the respondents believe that women are both physically and mentally weaker than men and need to be protected by society. When they were asked what they mean by society, they said that it is men. Even those who said women are not weaker than men, were not sure of their opinion. During the discussion on the survey, the respondents opined that if the Facebook profile of a female user is not regulated by offline gender norms, her chances of being understood as having a 'loose-character' was high. All the respondents believe that in the present Indian society, idea of character is very important to women. Though there are a few voices with regard to the equality of genders, it is noticed that the fundamental premises of gendering is not being questioned by any of them. Respondents were of mixed opinion in answering the question if there is any particular type of self representation liked by their contacts on Facebook. 49% of them answered yes and 51% said no.

The agreeing 49% included 96% of the female respondents. So, one can conclude that the female respondents generally believe that a particular type of self representation is liked by their contacts on Facebook. During the discussion on the survey, the female respondents said that they wish to upload only socially accepted photos, videos and opinions on their Facebook profile. They wish to upload a photo in which they are dressed according to the social expectations because these uploads are seen by their contacts. Female respondents also said that whenever their male contacts comment on a photo as sexy or hot, they feel as if someone is commenting on their body.

65% of female respondents did not agree when they were asked if they can post whatever they wish on their Facebook profile page. 83% of male and 85% of female respondents said that self representation of woman is regulated in both online and offline spaces. They also agreed that society has a different set of gender norms for men and women. Though 70% of the respondents are of the opinion that SNSs provide opportunities for democratic self representation they said that they cannot post whatever they wish on their Facebook profile page. 59% of the male and 64% of the female respondents believe that they cannot challenge the prescribed social norms and values even on Facebook.

About 80% of the female respondents and 73% of the male respondents are of the opinion that they cannot post whatever they wish, online. They are aware of the fact that offline society has a set of prescribed norms for gender representation. If they do not adhere to those norms the society will not accept them. These respondents either wish to pursue higher studies or get a job at the completion of the study. They do not wish to post on their profile the photos or videos which may portray that they do not follow the accepted gender norms. They wish to present an acceptable image to their prospective employer. According to the respondents, adhering to the gender norms of the mainstream society even on the cyberspace plays an important role in what they could expect from the society.

The respondents also said that women are more at risk for not following the mainstream norms. Men, they said, may be accepted for a non adherent comment, post or photo but women will never be accepted for the same. There are high chances of a woman being called a slut for being too exposing or using vulgar language on online space. According to the participants the Indian society is very orthodox with regard to the gender roles. The societal institutions propagate these mainstream gender norms in all walks of life.

**Conclusion:** During the questionnaire survey it was found that most users have accepted the mainstream

gender norms for self representation both on online and offline spaces. Results show that users are aware of being gendered through the process of socialization. They know that self representation even on SNS is regulated by offline gender norms. The users are aware that their self-representation on Facebook profile page is being noticed and discussed by their friends. Respondents are also aware that society would reprimand them if they do not follow mainstream gender norms. Therefore they take care to portray themselves even on cyberspace as adherent to the mainstream norms. However, the respondents cannot make a very clear distinction between online

and offline spaces. On the on hand, both the male and female respondents agree that SNSs provide enough opportunities for democratic self representation but on the other they are apprehensive if they could post everything they wish on their Facebook profile page. Further research would throw better light on Indian users' gendered self representation online.

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