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“Real life extension” in Web-based social networks: The gendered construction of self among student

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Starting Point

Social Network Sites worldwide: Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Xing or studiVZ

studiVZ: claims to be the biggest social network in Europe
(more than 5 million members and 6 billion PageImpressions, June 2008)

Public Discussion:

- privacy and securing data
- future employers looking at the “studiVZ”-profiles of prospect employees
- academic discourse: focuses on legal matters, false identities or authenticity

Thesis and research questions

Questions:

- how do German students use web-based social networks in their everyday life – are there significant gender differences?
- research focus lies in the communication among users of “studiVZ” and in the construction of the self
- how do users construct new online identities via Web-based social networks?

Thesis:

- The use of web-based social networks is not only a way to communicate efficiently, it is also an instrument of constructing self-identity

Theoretical concept within current research

- Manuel Castells „real life extension“ (2001)
- the Internet is part of our everyday life, we do the same in the Internet as in real life, probably in a different way e.g. more efficient, faster, cheaper
- politics of identity as central topic in a globalized and individualized world (Beck 1986, Giddens 1996)
- societies have developed a degree of complexity and subsystems
- under the conditions of increasingly media-driven information and communication, behavior strategies and decision-making patterns are needed in reference to the individual’s positioning in these relevant subsystems (Krotz 2001, Livingstone ICA 2008)

Screenshots of the Social Network “studivZ”



Research

- two qualitative focus group discussions with „studivZ-Users“
- online-research via questionnaire asking all students of the German city Potsdam (150.000 inhabitants, three universities with about 22.000 students)
 - University of Potsdam, University of Applied Science Potsdam, Film & Television Academy (HFF) “Konrad Wolf” Potsdam-Babelsberg
- Email via link to the questionnaire in February 2008
- response: 1.200 people (16.000 could get the Email via mail-account)
 - response from the universities is proportional
 - 1.021 studivZ-users
 - return is similar to other Social Network studies

Results

General

- response of 72 % women and only 28 % men
(proportion of 52 % women and 48 % men at all three universities in Potsdam)
- 82 % of all respondents between 18 and 26 years old
- nearly half of all respondents use studiVz frequently and are logged in up to 60 minutes on average
- social networks like studiVZ is an addition text-messages or Email

Theoretical Model

Functions

- private messages, blackboard (wall), “hug me”, groups, chat
- “Friends”: expandable network of members that can use special communication devices like chat. They can see the full profile of each other.



Technical functions influence construction of self



(Re-)presentation and online construction of self via:

- profile,
- own pictures and pictures of friends,
- memberships in groups.



Thesis

- Men and women have different motives for using „StudiVZ“ and different motives for use lead to different self (re-)presentation styles.

Functions – Gender differences

Women and men differ significantly in patterns and motives of using studiVZ.

Women (72%):

- registration because friends are registered (81 %)
- use studiVZ mainly for communication (81 %)
- do not intend to meet new people (6 %), communicate with people they know

Women: maintain relations

Men (28%):

- registration to get to know new people (25 %)
- 10 % intend to meet new people
- use network to communicate and to find old friends but want to get to know new people more often, 16 % meet them personally

Men: search new contacts

Functions – Gender differences

Women and men differ significantly in patterns and motives of using studiVZ

Women (maintain):

- have more “real” friends among “studiVZ”-friends (67 %)
- 93 % of women did not make new friends/contacts within studiVZ
- women use the communication functions more often
 - write news (to “real” friends)
 - more blackboard news (wall)
 - “Gruscheln” (Huggings)

Men (establish):

- have less “real” friends (52 %)
- 13 % did make new friends/contacts via the network
- men search more often
 - use communication function for new contacts
 - “Do you already know?” (offers of other profiles)

Functions – Gender differences

Which information do women and men look at profiles of strangers?

Women:

- only 22 % look at profiles of strangers
- great interest in profiles of people who they already know
- if they look at profiles of strangers they are often interested at groups (52 %) and blackboard news (37 %)

Men:

- look at profiles of strangers (45 %)
- use the search function “Do you already know?” more often
- less interest in groups (42 %) and blackboard news (26 %)

- No gender differences in the interest of profile pictures, personal data, general pictures and other „studiVZ“-friends

Functions – Group discussion

Women:

- „I want to communicate with my friends from school and university.“
- „I know all my friends from real life, before I communicate in ‘StudiVZ’“

Men:

- „my profile is fake, I want to look at pictures“
- „if somebody wants to be on my friendlist, no problem.“
- „of course you present yourself in a portal, it's logical.“

Functions – Self (Re)presentation

Different motives for use lead to different self representation styles

Women:

- 93 % profiles are „true“
- self portrait: “beautiful picture of me” (53 %)
- women delete embarrassing pictures (25 %)

„I am a girl and I have a normal picture in my profile.“

Men:

- only 80 % profiles are „true“
- 4 % got a 2nd user profile
- more often 'replacement' pictures
- (16%); either role models or nonsense pictures
- self portrait: beautiful picture of me (42%)
- men are more often visible for others

„It's a portal. The function is to present yourself in a good way.“

Functions – Self (Re)presentation

Different motives for use lead to different self representation

Women:

- Want to appear as “authentic”
- Want to bring out their best parts



Men:

- Want to represent to call attention
- Hide their “real” identities



Conclusion

- study shows the complex quality and the potential of Web-based communication and self-representation in social networks
- users of social networks are aware of constructing new online-identities
- question of authenticity and positive appearance plays an important role
- function and self-representation depend on each other

Different gender motives for use the social network lead to different self representation styles.

- a user who wants to communicate has to represent for this function
- a user who searches for the new contacts/friends has to represent therefore

Thank you for your attention!