

Profile Creation and Usage in Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Research on the creation of profiles in social networking has been an area of interest in the past few years, and they are used as a major source of information by recruiters and other interested stakeholders. For the purpose of this study we developed hypotheses based on self-presentation theory and the rules / norms applicable for a given networking context. We collected data from 150 network users out of which 85% respondents are maintaining at least one profile for more than two years. Analysis of the descriptive data and some written comments were done to test the hypotheses. Initial results of this exploratory study and subsequent discussion provide multiple insights for future research.

Keywords: Social networking, self- presentation theory, profile parameters, modes of interaction, identity theory.

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Introduction

Online Social Networking (OSN) sites are one of the most visited websites in the world today – the prevalence of Internet has made it very easy to access, create and maintain an online profile through any of the popular OSNs like Facebook, Google+, MySpace, Hi5 etc. In the report released in October 2011 by ComScore, a company specializing in measurements in the digital world, it was indicated that Social Networking accounted for nearly 1 out of every five minutes spent online. It also mentioned that Social Networking sites reach about 82% of the world's internet users aged 15 and above, representing about 1.2 billion users world wide. Specifically, Social Networking site Facebook reached more than half of the global computer users (55%) and accounted for 1 out of every 7 minutes spent online and 3 of every 4 social networking minutes.

OSNs have evolved from a collection of online friends to a platform that enables the users to experience personalized media as well as develop skills that are required for the new forms of socialization in the digital age.

Evolution of Social Networking Sites

Online social networking is not a recent phenomenon and its precursor can be found in the activities of independent Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) which were online meeting places created by computer enthusiasts in the late 80s and early 90s before the Internet revolution took the world by storm. Accessed over telephone lines using a modem, BBSs were mostly created by hobbyists who used it for sharing files and games and were mostly local forums due to the prohibitive costs of long distance telephony. Other

important options before the widespread use of Internet as seen today were the thousands of online ‘forums’ offered by CompuServe and AOL (America Online) and their member created communities with searchable ‘Member Profiles’.

With the advent and popularity of the Internet, the first fully fledged social networking site also emerged in the form of SixDegrees.com in 1997. This site allowed members to create profiles, invite friends, organize groups and surf others user profiles. In 2002, further inroads were made with the launch of Friendster – this showed the ‘circle of friends’ wherein the pathways connecting two people were displayed and also provided several ways for members to discover the common bonds amongst them.

In this context, we would like to adopt the definition provided by boyd and Ellison (2008) in identifying what constitutes a social networking site – they defined ‘social network’ sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. boyd and Ellison had consciously used the term ‘Social network’ instead of ‘Social networking’ though these two terms are often used interchangeably due to two reasons: that of emphasis and scope. According to them, ‘Networking’ emphasized relationship initiation mostly between strangers and while it was possible to do networking using these sites, it was not the primary practice on many of them. More than enabling strangers to meet on the internet, OSNs allow users to articulate and make visible their social networks.

During 2003, LinkedIn was launched and this presented a more serious approach to social networking by providing a forum for business professionals to connect with each other.

LinkedIn has more than 175 million members today. MySpace.com which was also launched in 2003 was an instant hit with specific focus on young adults, with options to share music, music videos etc. and a flashier, feature-filled environment.

However, it was the launch of Facebook in 2004 that altered the use and popularity of OSNs – initially launched among the student community in Harvard, Facebook opened up to the global audience in 2006 and is rated as the most popular website in the world today by Alexa with approximately 44% of the world's internet users visiting it.(Alexa 2012).

While the design and implementation of the technical features of OSNs vary significantly between the sites, all of them essentially contain the central characteristic of a 'visible profile' which is connected to a list of articulated 'friends' who are also users in the system. 'Profile' is the on-line identity that the individual assumes after joining the OSN – this is usually generated from the answers to a series of questions that the person provides which cover aspects like age, education, location, work information, marital status, interests and other preferences etc. In addition, almost all the sites encourage the member to upload a 'Profile Picture' and many of them allow members to add specific modules or 'applications' that enhance the profile. The visibility of the profile to other members varies from site to site and also the specific preferences selected by the user. Most of the sites provide only a restricted information of people who are not already connected as 'friends' unless the person has declared his or her profile to be 'public' or open to all. In case of sites like Facebook and Google+, one can create customized groups or 'friend's circles' where the profile is visible to every one else who is part of that group. This brings up the question as to who actually constitute as the set of people

with whom the person would like to interact – most of the OSNs prompt the new member to identify others in the system who are known to them and whom they are keen to interact with. Different sites use different labels to identify such individuals with the common labels being ‘friends’, ‘contacts’, ‘connections’ etc. The public display of connections within a group or a circle is a critical component of OSNs – this enables members to traverse through the network by looking through the ‘friends list’ of their contacts and sending / accepting requests for friendship with those whom they are not already connected. Finally, most of the OSNs allow options for the members to communicate with others in the systems either through publicly visible ‘comments’ or private messaging feature similar to short messaging services or email.

Literature Review

Research on the creation of Profiles in Social networking has been an area of interest in the past few years, especially with the implications in wide range of areas including recruitment. In the study conducted by Cook (2012) where the top twenty five advertising and public relations firms were surveyed, it was found that almost 72% of them were using social networking sites to recruit a prospect and as much as 64% of them were thinking of increasing the current usage in searching for a new prospect. As many as 73% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social networking sites are an excellent source of information on potential candidates.

Three theoretical aspects of creation and use of online profiles have been presented by Doring (2006): (a) Identity theory (b) Self presentation theory and (c) Computer mediated communication theory. Identity theories look at the relationship between ‘self’ and the ‘digital identity’ created on the Internet (Wynn & Katz, 1997). Doring (2006) postulated

that individuals can possess multiple digital identities which are differently connected to their 'offline' or 'real' identities.

Self presentation theories are based on Erving Goffman's (1959) idea of presentation of the self in a social environment. While the original study by Goffman restricted these interactions "as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence", in the later revision (Goffman, 1983) also noted this:

"Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's presence. (Presumably, the telephone and mails provide reduced versions of the primordial real thing)"

Virtual interactions that happen in a social networking context can also be viewed as another example of the "reduced version" of the 'primordial real thing' and adds an element of secrecy due to the lack of access to the 'offline' personality in most of the cases. The expressiveness of the individual and thereby that person's ability to give impressions to others is dependent on two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that **he gives**, and the expression that **he gives off**. (Goffman, 1959, pp.2). The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and others are known to attach to these symbols. The second involves a wide range of actions that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. Unlike in the case of an interaction that is happening in the physical presence, observers in the virtual world will have to rely on non-visual

clues to make inferences about a person and the 'profile' established by the person becomes the 'personality' with most of the impressions being 'given'. While the amount of information that they already possess about the individual would provide some element of security, one cannot entirely eliminate the possibility of acting based on inferences. When looked upon from the point of view of the person who is presenting himself / herself, the primary interest of this person would be to control and influence the conduct of others, specifically a responsive treatment from them. Again, unlike a physical interaction where the individual gets some time to 'prepare' for each interaction depending on the audience, the online profile, once created, has to be in a state of 'constant readiness' as any person might be having access to that profile at any given moment.

Goffman drew the parallel with a dramaturgical perspective where the people involved in the interactions gave 'performances' which were aimed at creating a certain impression on the minds of the audience. An important dimension of the performance is the 'front' – "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance". (Goffman, 1959, p.22). The 'front' is further made up of components that include the 'setting' which provides the background for the human actions and the stimuli that makes up the personal front in the form of 'appearance and manner'. 'Appearance' may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social status, while 'manner' may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation. In the context of a virtual environment, the online profile and the richness of the information

contained in it represents the ‘appearance’ while the ‘manner’ is conveyed through actual interactions with others in the form of chats, posts or comments made on others status updates. Goffman also mentions that “when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both. Further if the individual takes on a task that is not only new to him or if he attempts to change the light in which his task is viewed, he is likely to find that there are already several well established fronts among which he must choose. Thus when a task is given a new front we seldom find that the front it is given is itself new”. To extend this observation in the virtual environment of a social networking site, people who are invited by others to join the network or who are looking to establish online-ties with their friends and acquaintances would be largely driven by the profiles that are already set up and would choose to follow the same behavior.

Current literature on ‘identity’ presumes that there are multiple aspects of the self which are presented or made salient under different contexts. Higgins (1987) proposed that there are three domains of the self: the *actual* self (characteristics possessed by the individual), the *ideal* self (characteristics that the individual would ideally want to possess) and finally the *ought* self (characteristics that the individual ought to possess) – discrepancies between the actual and ideal self are linked to feelings of dejection. As indicated in the discussion related to self presentation, OSNs provide greater opportunity to control the way in which the personality is ‘presented’ with more focus on verbal and linguistic cues over the less controllable non-verbal communication cues and is therefore

more flexible and subject to increased self-censorship than in a face-to-face self presentation. When it comes to balancing the aspects of accuracy vs. desirability in the image projected by the profile, most of the participants create profiles that are closer to the ideal than the actual profile (Ellison et. al, 2006). Halperin (2006) makes an important distinction between *identity* (a set of characteristics which represent a person) and *identification* (relating to the disclosure of this identity information), highlighting that the ‘internal aspects of a person’s identity is entirely his own and on which information technology cannot operate’. In the study of managing impressions online in a Dating Environment, Ellison et. al indicate findings of people mentioning active interest in activities like hiking and surfing to increase the desirability of the profile, misrepresenting their weight to indicate a lesser value than what really was in anticipation of achieving that objective in the near-future and portraying other personal qualities that they intended to enhance or improve in the near future.

The three-component model proposed by Leary and Kowalski (1990) is used to understand the motivations behind creation of online profiles. The model is presented in figure 1.1. Impression monitoring happens when individuals are conscious of the impressions they are making, either because of the situation they are in, or because they are the type of people who are often aware of the impressions they make. If people see the ‘image’ they project as a key element in achieving personal goals or change the way they are perceived to a more desired direction, they will be motivated to engage in Impression Management. The second process in Leary and Kowalski’s model is ‘Impression Motivation’ – where the individual wants to influence the impressions created in others. The individual may want others to think highly of him, or to think that

he thinks highly of them or even to create a perception about his feelings towards them. Sometimes the individual acts in a totally calculating manner, expressing himself in such a way as to evoke a particular response from others that he had pre-meditated to obtain. Sometimes the individual would knowingly express himself in a particular way because of the regulations and norms that were expected in that group so as to ensure the necessities of acceptance and approval and not for any other specific benefit. This would be observed in the case of a person creating the profile that is part of a ‘closed’ group – that of individuals joined together by a common interest or passion or even professional membership. The type of impressions or images that people choose to ‘construct’ depend on their self-concept, the type of identity they have or like to have (*‘ideal self’*), the values they assume the audience has and the specific context and setting in which they see the images being perceived.

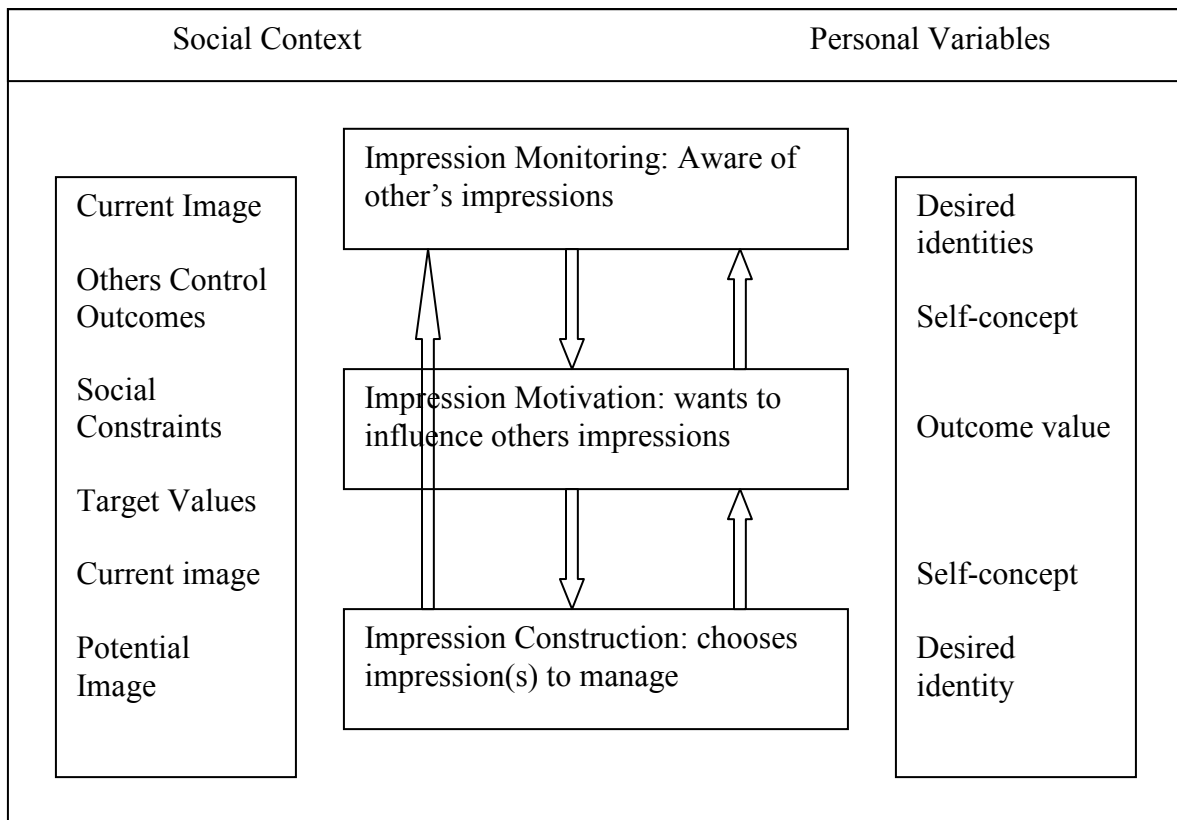


Figure 1-1: Three Component Model, Based on Leary and Kowalski, 1990, Leary 1993

This has a parallel with the Uses and gratifications research, where the use of media to satisfy cognitive and affective needs of the individual including personal and entertainment needs have been studied. (Rubin, 2002). The needs that have been covered are that of personal identity, escape and self-presentation.

The selection of an 'image' to construct is the final step in the Leary and Kowalski model – knowing that 'profile' holds the key towards perceptions and inferences created in others, the individual engages in an 'information game' – which could involve concealment, discovery, affirmation and re-discovery by maintaining the status quo or incremental 'updates' to the profile to send out signals that would lead to the desirable response on the part of others. Therefore, the initial information that the individual possesses about fellow participants or potential audience who would be observing the profile is of critical importance in defining the situation and 'building' the image that is first deployed. As the interactions among the participants increases with the progress in time, additions and modifications to the initial information state will occur and these additional updates would often be in conformance with the initial status so that there are no major contradictions. danah boyd (2006) has discussed how the performance of social identity and relationships has changed the nature of the OSN profile from being 'a static representation of Self to a communicative body in conversation with the other represented bodies'. As observed by Goffman (1959), *'Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with the principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly*

signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon others, obliging them to value and treat him the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect'. While the individual might have taken sufficient precautions to ensure that the image projected is consistent with the response that was desired to be generated, it would still require preventive practices to avoid embarrassing exposes. Such practices can be of two broad types: when the individual employs specific strategies and tactics to protect his own projections, it results in 'defensive practices' whereas when they are employed to save or maintain the definition of the situation projected by another, it leads to 'protective practices'. In case of a virtual environment where the online profile is being presented, one would observe both the defensive as well as preventive practices that are deployed to protect the impression that was originally produced by the profile.

The scope of the study is limited to the analysis of the creation and use of profiles in the context of the identity and self presentation theories and is not looking at the use of use computer / Internet as a medium of communication. The study also links the impact of 'Rules' and the online 'community' which the subject is part of, in deciding the online profile that is created.

Presentation of Self in an Online Environment

Online environment offers complete freedom to an individual on how to present himself which is in contrast to the physical interaction situation where there may be occasions where the individual is not in complete control. It also offers opportunities to present the

details that would project the person having specific social characteristics without having the need to wait until the specific subject is brought up or needing to create an appropriate opening in the interactions to introduce the subject directly. Bargh et al. (2002) identified that when compared to face-to-face interactions, online interactions allowed individuals to better express aspects of their true selves – aspects that they wanted to express, but felt unable to do so. Thus it is easy for the individual to update the profile with the pictures of an overseas trip or the purchase of an expensive item like a car or a home and also reach out to prospective audience beyond geographical limits. Again, individuals can establish their ‘pedigree’ by updating the profile with details of their education, jobs held, organizations and clubs they are members of, or any awards and honors received by them. The following hypotheses are made on the basis of the literature study on the presentation of self:

Hypothesis 1: The profile created by an individual will be influenced by the social setting in which it is being presented.

Most of the individuals create their initial profiles in conformance with the guidelines and norms that are prevalent in the social setting in which they are being presented. Thus the quality and quantity of information presented in the profile will vary when presented in a personal group vs. professional group, purpose and context in which the online presence exists (career enhancement through a group like LinkedIn vs. keeping in touch with old friends through an alumni group), public vs. closed group setting etc. Members are influenced by the style and levels of information presented by other members of that forum / group and create a profile that is adopted by majority of the members. Ellison et.al (2006) pointed out that in case of a setting like an online dating environment, where

the anticipated future face-to-face interaction to establish an intimate relationship resulted in people being more open in their profiles and were even not suppressing the negative aspects of the self, sometimes even doing intentional or deliberate self-disclosure.

Hypothesis 2: Amount of information provided when the profile is created initially will vary based on the objective or purpose for which the profile was created.

The online profile of an individual will become the identity that the individual will present to the potential audience and while online and social networking forums provide a variety of pre-selected fields to be populated, it is often observed that the candidates do only a selective update of these fields while leaving the remainder blank. Again, while the online forums do adopt security measures to prevent the information from being mis-used by others, there are several such cases being reported on a regular basis which prevent the individuals from disclosing what they consider as sensitive information. The amount of information that is initially provided in the profile would depend on the objective that the individual wants to achieve from setting up the profile. Individuals who are primarily interested in keeping contact with their family and friends, were primarily motivated by their friends to create the profile and those want to do self-promotion using the profile would be providing more information than those who joined out of curiosity or to meet like minded people. The latter category would be reluctant to share more information, especially that of personal nature until they more comfortable and secure in providing such information.

Hypothesis 3: Updates to the profile information will be dependent on the frequency and nature of interactions that the individual is having with the rest of the members.

While the profile might have got created initially with not all the fields populated, individuals do update these fields at a later stage and also provide ‘status updates’ – where significant events / happenings in their personal / professional lives get posted in the online forum. The frequency of such updates will be related to the frequency of interactions that the individual is having with fellow members. Berger and Luckman (1967) proposed the idea of ‘Social Constructionism’ – the ways in which people and the groups they form contribute to the creation of their perceived social reality – or the collective power of society to determine or shape individual identity. The Structuration Theory put forward by Anthony Giddens (1984) looks at the issue whether individuals create society or society determines who we are – and instead of focusing on either the individual or the society, examines ‘social practices ordered over space and time’. Giddens goes on to postulate that ‘all human action is at least partly predetermined within and by the context in which it occurs, but that predetermination itself is maintained and changed by human action’. In case of more interactions and participation in the online forum, there are more chances of the profile being updated with additional information. As the interactions become more frequent, the individual develops a better degree of trust and confidence in fellow members and would open up to share more details about him / her in the profile. There will be minimal or no updates in the case of individuals who do not take part in any interactions with the rest of the members in the online community.

Hypothesis 4: Mode of communication used to interact with other members will be influenced by the privacy setting used by the individual.

There are multiple options available to individuals to interact with other members of the online communities in the form of chat, sharing pictures and videos, status updates,

private messages etc. Online forums offer individuals to selectively choose the security option in sharing their information with others which varies from the profile being visible to any person at one extreme to the profile being visible only to candidates selected by the individual. In case of individuals who have restricted access of their profile to only selected candidates, private messages would be commonly used mode of communication whereas those without having any restrictions in access to their profiles by others would be using other modes like status updates and chat more than private messages. Individuals who have placed restrictions on access to their profiles are more worried about security issues related to the communication and are more in favor of private messages which would not be visible to others.

Method

Data was collected from 150 respondents to a survey instrument where they were asked questions about their usage of social networking forums in terms of number of profiles that are currently active, how long they have been active in social networking forums, details of the profiles they are currently having in terms of the profile picture, personal details provided in the profile, frequency of updates, preferred mode of communication with others, number of 'friends' whom they have in these forums, what they consider as the most important purpose of their profile and whether any specific response from others makes them unhappy. 46 of the 150 respondents were female and other details collected include educational qualification, age group and the average time spent in internet usage in a week. In terms of age group distribution, 40% of the respondents were in the 31 – 40 yrs bracket, 27% in the 41 – 50 yrs bracket, 14% in the 26 – 30 yrs bracket, 11% in the 18 – 25 yrs bracket and the final 8% were above 50 yrs of age. Again, in

terms of geographical distribution, 80% of the respondents were based in India and remaining based out of rest of Asia, North America, Europe and Australia.

Results and Analysis

The summary of the analysis of the data collected is presented under various headings below:

Type and number of profiles

Facebook was the overwhelming favorite among the respondents of this sample with as many as 148 of the 150 respondents having a Facebook profile. The second position was taken up by LinkedIn with 119 of the respondents having a profile and Google+ came third with 84 respondents having a profile. There were 47 profiles in other forums like Hi5, Orkut, Twitter and MySpace. Almost 85% of them had maintained at least one profile for more than 2 years and the rest had maintained the profiles for less than 2 years. 39% of the respondents were having three active profiles while 31% had two active profiles and 13% each had one or four profiles and only 4% had more than five active profiles.

Profile Purpose

As much as 52% of the respondents indicated that they had created the profile to 'Stay in touch with family and friends' and next best reasons for creating the profile were 'Out of curiosity' (11%), 'Friends were using it' (10%), Invited by a friend (9%), 'Search for Old friends' (9%) and 'to meet like-minded people' (7%).

Privacy settings

44% of the respondents had chosen their profiles to be visible only to selected people (people who are their 'friends' only) while 41% had chosen the setting which made their

profiles partially visible to every one. Only 15% had selected the setting which made their profile visible to every one. Further analysis based on Gender of the respondents revealed that 59% of the female respondents had chosen the option of the profiles being visible to only people selected by them whereas in the case of Male respondents the corresponding figure was only 38%.

Age	Only selected people can view profile	Part of the profile is visible to all	Entire profile is visible to all
18 - 25 years	29.41%	52.94%	17.65%
26 - 30 years	61.90%	28.57%	9.52%
30 - 40 years	45.00%	36.67%	18.33%
41 - 50 years	37.50%	52.50%	10.00%
Above 50 years	50.00%	25.00%	25.00%
Grand Total	44.00%	40.67%	15.33%

Table 1: Age vs. Privacy Setting

Number of friends

As would be expected, younger respondents were found to have more number of online ‘friends’ than their older counterparts. As indicated in the table below, as much as 70% of the respondents in the age group of 18 – 25 years had more than 300 ‘friends’ while 62% of the 26 – 30 year age group respondents had the same figure.

Age	<10	11 to 50	51 to 100	100 to 300	> 300
18 - 25 years	0%	6%	18%	6%	70%
26 - 30 years	0%	0%	9%	29%	62%
31 - 40 years	3%	13%	8%	38%	38%
41 - 50 years	3%	5%	15%	40%	37%
Above 50 years	0%	8%	25%	25%	42%

Table 2: Number of friends based on age group of the respondents

Privacy setting vs. Mode of Interactions

Among the people who had selected their profiles to be visible only to selected members, the most popular mode of interaction with others was through private messages with Chat and Posting of videos and pictures as the next best options. In case of profiles which

were visible to every one the most preferred mode of communication was through status updates as outlined in the Table 3 below.

Privacy Setting	Mode of interactions				
	Chat	Posting pictures and videos	Private messages	Sharing others posts	Status update
Visible only to selected	21.21%	21.21%	33.33%	9.09%	15.15%
Part of your profile is visible to all	22.95%	21.31%	22.95%	6.56%	26.23%
Your entire profile is visible to all	26.09%	13.04%	21.74%	4.35%	34.78%
Grand Total	22.67%	20.00%	27.33%	7.33%	22.67%

Table 3: Privacy setting vs. Mode of interaction

Importance of the Profile

When looked at the importance attached to the profiles, it was evident that most of the users found it very important to keep in touch with others (63%) as well as to communicate with others (23%). The profile was least viewed as a source of entertainment and a measure of the social life and only less than 3% considered the profile not to be important.

Purpose of creating profile	Importance of the profile				
	Communicate with others	Entertain me	Keep in touch	My social life	Not important
Invited by a friend	30.77%	7.69%	30.77%	7.69%	23.08%
Friends were using it	13.33%	0.00%	80.00%	6.67%	0.00%
Out of curiosity	0.00%	11.76%	82.35%	0.00%	5.88%
Meet like-minded people	45.45%	9.09%	18.18%	27.27%	0.00%
Promote oneself	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	0.00%
Search for old friends	23.08%	0.00%	61.54%	15.38%	0.00%
Stay in touch with friends and family	24.36%	1.28%	71.79%	2.56%	0.00%
Upload pictures and video	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Grand Total	22.67%	4.00%	63.33%	6.67%	2.67%

Table 4: Importance of the profile picture

Profile Picture

63% of the respondents were having their own photograph as the Profile picture while another 27% had the picture of themselves with other family members. Among the respondents who had the most preferred reasons for creating the profile, this number was expectedly very high (more than 60%) as the purpose was mostly to stay in touch with

friends or because their friends were using online profiles thereby validating Hypothesis 1.

Reason for creating profile	Profile Picture				
	Picture of a family member	No Photo	Self and others	Self	Other
Invited by a friend	7.69%	7.69%	38.46%	46.15%	0.00%
Friends were using it	0.00%	6.67%	26.67%	66.67%	0.00%
Out of curiosity	0.00%	5.88%	35.29%	52.94%	5.88%
Meet like-minded people	0.00%	0.00%	9.09%	90.91%	0.00%
Promote oneself	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%
Search for old friends	0.00%	7.69%	30.77%	61.54%	0.00%
Stay in touch with friends and family	0.00%	3.85%	26.92%	64.10%	5.13%
Upload pictures and video	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Grand Total	0.67%	4.67%	27.33%	63.33%	4.00%

Table 5: Type of Profile pictures

Reasons for choosing the Profile picture

Interpretive analysis of the comments from the respondents indicated five primary factors that determined the selection of the profile picture as outlined in the Table 6 below:

Reasons for choosing the particular profile picture	
Sense of identity	<i>"So that people can see who I am", "It is my profile. So my pic", "To help others identify me easily", "I want my old friends to recognize me", "Because I think profile pic should be your face, the most unique identity"</i>
Feeling / Emotion	<i>"I like that pic of mine", "That was a picture I liked", "Because it brings back old memories", "The photograph is special to me"</i>
Looking Good	<i>"Just took one good pic from my album", "Shows me in a charming way", "It looks good and impressive", "Was taken by a professional camera and looked good"</i>
Includes Significant others	<i>"Felt good about last meeting with friends after 2 years", "My family means everything to me", "It is with my family", "The picture shows my admiration for him and his being not alive is something difficult for me to accept", "I wanted to put my son's photo along with me"</i>
Occasion / Other reasons	<i>"Its related to a game, I like that game so changed my profile pic to that", "After a foreign trip", "Marriage", "I look good in it, it shows a place I holidayed in"</i>

Table 6: Reason for choosing the profile picture

Profile Parameters updated

While there was a maximum of 10 different parameters in the profile template that were identified as providing key information about the individual, it was observed that only 45% of the total respondents had updated 8 or above of these parameters. 42% had filled 5 to 7 parameters while the remaining 13% had filled only 4 or less. While examining the link between the purpose of creating the profile and the number of profile parameters that were filled it was observed that those who had created the profile to stay in touch with family and friends, to promote themselves, to search for old friends and to find like minded people were the ones who had fixed most of the parameters, supporting Hypothesis 2. Summary of the relationship between purpose of creating the profile and the number of profile parameters updated is shown Table 7:

Reason for creating Profile	Profile Parameters updated		
	4 or below	5 to 7	8 to 10
Invited by a friend	38.46%	30.77%	30.77%
Friends were using it	13.33%	26.67%	60.00%
Out of curiosity	23.53%	29.41%	47.06%
Meet like-minded people	9.09%	36.36%	54.55%
Promote oneself	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%
Search for old friends	0.00%	46.15%	53.85%
Stay in touch with friends and family	8.97%	48.72%	42.31%
Upload pictures and video	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%

Table 7: Number of Profile Parameters updated

Frequency of updating profile status

About 25% of the respondents never update their status which indicates they are mostly consumers of updates provided by their friends and not 'creators'. 31% of the respondents update their status at least once in a month while 19% of them provide a status update at least once in a week. The percentage of respondents who make at least

one status update on a daily basis was only close to 5%. The corroboration between the reasons for creating the profile and the frequency of providing status updates is indicated in Table 8:

Reason for Profile Creation	Frequency of Updating status				
	Never	Once in a Day	Once in a month	Once in a week	Once in a year
Invited by a friend	46.15%	7.69%	15.38%	0.00%	30.77%
My friends were using it	26.67%	6.67%	46.67%	6.67%	13.33%
Out of curiosity	41.18%	0.00%	35.29%	5.88%	17.65%
To meet like-minded people	9.09%	9.09%	27.27%	36.36%	18.18%
To promote oneself	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%
To search for old friends	7.69%	7.69%	46.15%	15.38%	23.08%
To stay in touch with friends and family	24.36%	3.85%	28.21%	25.64%	17.95%
Upload pictures and video	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	25.33%	4.67%	30.67%	19.33%	20.00%

Table 8: Reason for Profile creation vs. Frequency of status updates.

Discussion

The results and analysis of the survey data shows very high adoption of social networking profiles across all age groups and specific considerations chosen by individuals while creating their profiles. While it may be pointed out that a significant percentage of the population in a country like India still does not have access to the internet, it is important to acknowledge the fact that social media is playing a major role in the interaction among individuals and opening up newer opportunities for people to present themselves to a larger audience located beyond geographical limits.

As the profile picture is an important element that captures the attention of any person viewing the profile, participants are attaching high level of significance and importance for the same. Again, a person who is creating the profile for the first time is influenced by the rules and norms of the particular social setting and when he finds most of the profile pictures being self-portraits, chooses to follow the same trend. However, when it comes to selecting a particular picture among the various self-portraits, individuals are

guided by one of the three factors: the sense of identity, feelings / emotions and the need to be 'looking good in front of others'. In the case of individuals who set up the profile with the purpose of staying in touch with family and friends and to connect with old friends, inclusion of significant others along with themselves in the profile picture is an easy choice. As pointed out by boyd in her observation of profiles set up on 'Friendster', "complete with descriptive data, photographs, articulated friendship links and testimonials, (profile) simultaneously constitutes a digital body, a social creation, an initiator of conversation, and a medium for ongoing conversation in multiple modalities'. (boyd, 2006).

Another interesting finding from the study is about the increasing importance attached to the privacy of the information provided in the profile and safe-guarding the same against potential security breaches. Only the respondents in the 18 – 25 year age group were the category that had a lower percentage in the profile being visible to a selected set of people. As this age group mostly comprises of students or fresh college pass-outs, it is possible that privacy and security related issues are of less concern for this particular category. It was also observed that there was a sharp increase in the immediate age group of 26 – 30 in selecting the setting of restricted access to the profile indicating that the priorities of these age groups are different. Again the study supported the Hypothesis 4 that individuals make conscious choice while selecting the mode of communications with others in the online world based on the privacy settings they have selected. Security and Privacy consideration again play an important role in the number of profile parameters that are shared by the individuals in their profiles.

The study also indicated that younger online social network users had, on an average, a greater number of ‘friends’ than older users. Here again, the difference in approach to accepting ‘friend’ requests between these two generations might be a potential influence for this difference. For the younger generation, the ‘number of online friends’ might be seen as a bragging factor and popularity index while they may not actually be interacting with all those people who have been accepted as ‘friends’ in the online world. In the case of the older generation, the traditional definition of friendship might influence the acceptance of friend requests from others. It would actually be a separate topic worth investigating to study on an average how many of these friends are engaged in meaningful interactions amongst various age groups to bring about specific differences in the definition and purpose of ‘online friends’.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

As the adoption of social media networking keeps increasing in an explosive scale, the significance of the online profiles in presenting the identity of the individual is becoming even more important. It would also be of interest to closely follow the emerging socialization practices and how these can impact the interactions in ‘real’ life also. While this study had mostly used descriptive analysis to validate the hypothesis, it does point to the varying trends among different segments of the online social networking users when it comes to creating profiles and selecting the associated settings related to privacy, degree of information shared etc. The impact of social media in presenting the content with a potentially larger audience and the resulting impact on the popularity of the individual has been observed recently with several instances of content ‘going viral’ as in the case of ‘Gangnam Style’ video from the South Korean musician Psy.

An important area for future research would be the relationship between the online profile and the real life personality and potential conflicts that can emerge due to significant differences between these two. This would require detailed analysis using structured interviews to explore how the real identity differs from the one that is projected by the profile and how the individual has been ‘hiding the true self’ behind the mask of the online identity. It would also point to the conflicts and stresses that the individual is exposed to due to the differences between the online profile and the ‘real person’ and how it can impact the personal lives.

Another area of research would be the emotional impact of activities that happen in the virtual world on the ‘real’ personality. For example, individuals could be negatively impacted by the actions from others in the form of rejection of a ‘friend request’, negative comments made in their profiles which are visible to others, perceived lack of response from others against the comments / updates made by individuals etc. As we find the differences between online and offline interactions between individuals getting thinner, it would be good to do a detailed study on how the events triggered by the virtual world can impact the emotional framework of individual participants.

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