

## **ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK USE THROUGH THE LENS OF SUSAN FISKE'S SOCIAL MOTIVES THEORY**

Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) is a social networking tool—a website that enables users to interact with one another. Currently, Facebook has over 500 million active users; combined, these users spend about 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook sharing content with one another (“Statistics,” 2010). Facebook allows users to not only interact with each other, but also to observe online interactions between peers, friends, and family members. Individuals spend much time interacting with their network of contacts via Facebook’s online interface, and much time shaping their online personality. Are the primary motivations for social exchanges the same in the virtual world as they are in the physical world? Susan Fiske offers a model of five core social motives that drive human interactions: belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancing, and trusting (Fiske, 2004). Fiske’s conception of the social motives that operate in the physical world also apply to the way that Facebook users conduct themselves in the virtual world. Fiske’s five core social motives are especially evident in individuals’ management of photos posted on Facebook.

Facebook users build their network by adding “friends.” Permission must be given by both parties in order for two Facebook users to become friends and access each other’s information. Facebook users can interact with anyone who is their friend; the average Facebook user has 130 friends (“Statistics,” 2010). In response to privacy concerns, Facebook offers users the ability to block content and information from specific friends and/or groups of friends.

Facebook users can interact with their network of friends in a number of ways. A large portion of Facebook use is based on the generation of content; users post information about themselves, write messages to each other, post web links, record videos, and share photos with their friends. The ability to post photos has been available since the early days of Facebook. Last year, site administrators cited that 220 million new photos were uploaded each week (Vagjel, 2009). Current figures show that Facebook is home to more than 50

billion total pictures (Johnson, 2010). Users can upload photos from their computers or mobile phones to create albums. Users must name each album and may choose to denote location—where the pictures in the album were taken. After the photos are uploaded, the user who uploaded the pictures can write captions for each picture and can “tag” the people in each photo. Tagging a photo means indicating which friends are in each picture. After writing captions for the photos and tagging friends in the photos, the user can publish the new album to his/her wall. Once an album is published, it is available for other users to see.

After a photo album is published on Facebook, other site users can view the photos, captions, and tags. Other users can add tags. Only the user who originally uploaded the photo album has the ability to delete tags of everyone in the picture; other users are only able to delete tags of themselves. When a user deletes a tag of him or herself, it is often referred to as “untagging.”

Users who view pictures are not able to edit the captions of the pictures, but have the ability to comment on the pictures. In addition to having the ability to comment on pictures, users can use the “like” button to indicate a preference for either the picture as a whole, or a certain comment on the picture. The user who originally uploaded the picture has the authority to delete any comment on the picture; other users can only delete comments they posted themselves.

There are a variety of ways to limit who sees photos posted by an individual user. Users have a lot of control over the privacy settings, even down to individual pictures that other users can see. General privacy settings offer four options for sharing photo albums each individual user uploads: “Everyone,” “Friends Only,” “Friends of Friends,” and “Other.” The “Everyone” setting allows all Facebook users to see a user’s photo albums. The “Friends Only” setting allows only a user’s friends to see the photo albums he/she uploads. The “Friends of Friends” setting allows a user’s friends as well as friends of a user’s friends to view photo albums he/she uploads. The “Other” setting is a customizable setting which allows the user to block specific friends or groups of friends from seeing uploaded photo albums. General privacy settings also offer the same privacy options for a user to regulate which other users can see photos he/she is tagged in. General privacy settings are applied to all photo albums and/or tagged photos. Privacy settings can also be adjusted for individual

photo albums so that specific friends or groups of friends are unable to view some of a user's albums, but have access to other albums.

Each Facebook user also designates a photo to be his or her "profile picture." A thumbnail version of the profile picture is included next to every post a user makes on the site; and a larger size of the profile picture is included in the top left hand corner of user's profile—the page on which a user posts all personal information and on which users' can post messages or links. A user can change his or her profile as often as he or she pleases.

The ways in which Facebook users manage their pictures—which pictures they choose to include in albums, which pictures they tag or untag, and which pictures they choose as their profile pictures—give insight into the ways in which people manipulate their online image so that it fits the ways in which they wish to be represented. The ways in which Facebook users use pictures to interact and make connections with each other—the album names users create, the photos they choose to include in their albums, the captions they write, the comments they post, and the pictures they "like"—give insight into users' values, interests, and relationships.

Susan Fiske proposed that human behavior is governed by five core social motives: belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancing, and trusting. These motives are intended to explain the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of human beings when they are in social situations—situations in which they are influenced by the real or imagined presence of others. Each of the social motives is more or less influential based on the interaction between an individual's personality and goals, and the situations that individual is a part of (Fiske, 2004).

The belonging motive is defined by Fiske as the "need for strong, stable relationships." Individuals pursue close social bonds with others; they seek to both create new bonds and nurture existing bonds with fellow humans. The belonging motive is an overarching need that plays a part in each of the other four social motives (Fiske, 2004).

Two of Fiske's motives, the understanding motive and the controlling motive, are cognitively-based motives; they involve thinking about facts and arranging pieces of information into workable ideas and concepts. The understanding motive is defined by Fiske as the "need for shared meaning and prediction." Individuals aim to understand the motivations and provocations that drive others so that the behaviors of others can be predicted and interpreted in uncertain situations. The controlling motive is defined by Fiske as the "need for perceived contingency between behavior and outcomes." Individuals aspire to be viewed as influential, competent, and effective in social situations. The understanding motive is more reflective in nature than the controlling motive, which is more active (Fiske, 2004).

The remaining two motives, the self-enhancing motive and the trusting motive, are relatively affective motives; they involve discerning feelings and emotions. The need for self-enhancing is defined by Fiske as the "need for viewing self as basically worthy or improvable." Individuals aim to maintain a positive sense of self-worth; people seek positive reinforcement from others and tend to act in ways that facilitate self-improvement so they can continue to feel good about themselves. The need for trusting is defined by Fiske as the "need for viewing others as basically benign." Individuals desire to see their social environment as genuinely amiable, dependable, and honest; because of this, people are inclined to think that others are inherently good and that interacting with others will be a pleasant experience. The self-enhancing motive is more self-directed in nature than the trusting motive, which is more other-directed (Fiske, 2004).

Fiske's model of the five core social motives have been used to explain individuals' behaviors in both individualist societies—cultures in which the success of the individual is emphasized and takes priority over the success of the group—and collectivist societies—cultures in which the success of the group is emphasized and takes priority over the success of the individual (Fiske, 2004). Fiske's model can also be used to explain individuals' behavior in online social networking sites, specifically in relation to the image-management behaviors and social interactions involving photos on Facebook.

The belonging motive can be used to explain almost any action of a Facebook user, especially in relation to the posting of photos. The very action of posting photos has its purpose rooted in the human need

for belonging; users upload photos so that moments of kinship can be re-lived when friends view the photos. It is common for a user to write captions as he/she uploads photos. This caption often refers to a joke that is related to the events surrounding the picture; referencing “inside jokes” can provide a relic of the camaraderie that existed when the photo was taken. It is not uncommon, also, for users to label a picture “the gang” or “my faves.” After the pictures are posted, other users can comment on the photo and/or indicate that they “like” the photo. Photo comments and expressions of “like” for a photo are used to remember, strengthen, and even ultimately continue the bonding experience captured in the photo. These interactions that take place when photos are posted on Facebook exemplify the human desire to feel a part of a cohesive in-group.

The understanding motive is evident in Facebook users’ interactions with photos posted by others on the site. It is typical for a Facebook user to spend a substantial amount of time looking at what other people have posted on Facebook, even if the posted content is unrelated to the user; this is an activity commonly referred to as “Facebook stalking.” It is very common to Facebook stalk the photos featuring another person.

Viewing photos of a Facebook friend can reveal much about what he/she values. For example, if the Facebook user is in a lot of pictures with his/her family, then it follows that he/she enjoys spending time with family members; if a Facebook user is taking shots and/or playing beer pong in a lot of pictures, then it follows that he/she places an emphasis on partying. The comments made on any given picture can represent relationships between people in the picture as well as relationships between the subjects of the picture and other Facebook users who are not in the picture. Comments, as well as picture captions can provide context for the picture. For example, if there is a picture featuring a Facebook user crowd surfing at a concert, but a caption or comment on the picture reads, “SO TERRIFYING! I am never doing that again!” the context of the picture is different than if the caption or comment on the picture reads (not trying to be ironic) “Here I go again...Just a typical Saturday night.”

The photo that a user chooses for his/her profile picture can be especially enlightening. A Facebook user’s profile picture is the most-viewed image of that person at any given time, so inferences of how a person wishes to be viewed can be made based on the profile picture. For example, if a person looks trashy in his or

her picture, it is clear that he/she is trying to project a very different image than a person who posts a more wholesome-looking profile picture.

It is common for a user to Facebook stalk a new acquaintance or a potential romantic interest. In these circumstances, the purpose of Facebook stalking is to glean information about the other person so that a decision can be made about how to proceed in establishing a relationship with the person. It is also common for a user to Facebook stalk a well-known acquaintance or family member. In these circumstances, the purpose of Facebook stalking is to glean information about what the other person is currently up to and to feel more in-touch with the person's current life events. In both instances, Facebook stalking is the process of seeking information to better understand another human being. Facebook stalking is proof positive of the understanding motive—the human desire to understand the thought processes, emotions, and motivations that drive others.

The controlling motive is evident in Facebook users' manipulation of photos, captions, and comments to influence others' comprehension of the content. There are several levels at which a Facebook user can control the interpretation of images of him or herself that appear on the site. Users can adjust privacy settings so that certain friends or groups of friends are unable to view certain photos; this is useful to control and refine the image that is projected to selected friends. Users can also mediate other users' interpretations of photos by commenting on photos or writing captions for the photos. To use the previous example of a Facebook user crowd surfing at a concert, a user who comments "SO TERRIFYING! I am never doing that again!" is manipulating the context of the picture, and is thus able to influence others' interpretation of the picture. Facebook users' use of these mechanisms to influence the way that other users perceive them exemplifies the controlling motive—the human desire to affect the interpretations and actions of others.

The self-enhancing motive is evident in Facebook users' behavior in managing photos of themselves that are posted on the site. Much of an individual's photo-related activity on Facebook is centered on maintaining a positive image. Users have the opportunity to oversee and regulate the photos which they are associated with.

At the most basic level, when a user uploads pictures from his or her camera, he or she has control of which pictures to upload onto the site, and which pictures to omit. Many users choose not to upload any pictures in which they appear unflattering or unattractive. Even after a picture has been uploaded, a user can disassociate him or herself from the picture. Some users choose to untag all photos of themselves that are less-than-flattering.

The desire to be seen in a flattering light is especially relevant in a user's choosing of a profile picture. Because the profile picture is the first (and sometimes the only) picture that a user's friends can see, the majority of profile pictures are such that the user looks at his or her best. For some users, having a positive, well-liked, well-maintained image on Facebook may even serve as a source of self-esteem in non-virtual settings. Facebook users' management of photos so that they are presented in the best possible light is proof positive of the self-enhancing motive—the human desire to maintain high self-esteem levels.

The trusting motive is the least relevant in explaining Facebook users' activities. However, inherent trust in others is relevant in the behaviors surrounding the posting of photos on Facebook. Sometimes photos posted on Facebook can be incriminating. For example, a large number of teenagers post photos of themselves and their friends holding alcoholic beverages, even though they are not old enough to be drinking legally. Many users are wary of not posting evidence of their law-breaking activities on Facebook, and must trust their friends to use good judgment in selecting which pictures to upload to Facebook. This is one example of the trusting motive—the belief that humanity is inherently good and will act in ways that are just—at work in the Facebook users' behaviors.

Susan Fiske's model of core social motives is relevant both in the physical world and the virtual world of social networking sites such as Facebook. Facebook users' behaviors, especially in relation to the posting, managing, and interacting with one another via photos, illustrate the human desires for belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancing, and trusting in social situations.

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