Facebook Community is Judgmental: A Symbolic Interaction Perspective on Context Collapse and Identity Construction of Youth on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Despite the versatility and longevity of Facebook as a Social Networking Site (SNS) in comparison to Instagram, the Daily Active Users count and the average time spent per day have dropped significantly during the recent past. The observed drop in the popularity of Facebook is confounding from a marketing perspective since Facebook appears to provide more benefits and values than Instagram. Hence, using symbolic interaction as a theoretical lens, in this paper we engage in a discussion on how identity construction complexities on SNSs with greater context collapse, such as Facebook, could contribute to users' preference for SNSs having smaller communities with less context collapse, such as Instagram. A qualitative study was carried out with the participation of 14 informants in the age group between 18-34 years. The data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews which were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the greater context collapse on Facebook has created discomfort for youth in constructing identities. Theoretically, this explains how the unclear, and at times, conflicting 'universes of discourse' operating on Facebook impose complexities to navigating user behaviour. Further, the lesser context collapse on Instagram which provides a more cohesive 'universe of discourse' allows the youth to construct a more expansive identity that conforms to community norms. This study theoretically accentuates the repercussions of developing and managing undifferentiated SNSs catering to the mass market, which makes it difficult for users to navigate the expectations of diverse audiences.

Keywords - Context Collapse, Facebook, Instagram, Social Networking Sites, Symbolic Interactionism, Universes of discourse

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Introduction

Facebook is undoubtedly the reigning champion of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) with over 1.9 billion daily active users worldwide (Hamilton, 2022). However, recently, it appears that there is a decline in the usage of Facebook, in terms of daily active users (Hamilton, 2022) and the average time spent by a user (Hutchinson, 2021a; Deyan, 2022). On the other hand, Instagram, which is an SNS owned by the same parent company, has recorded an increase in usage (Hutchinson, 2021a; Deyan, 2022). These opposite trends in usage patterns of the two SNSs have been recorded despite the broader scope of benefits offered by Facebook, which is considered to be an all-encompassing SNS that enables user interactions in the form of video calls, audio calls, instant messages, sharing picture or video-based content and even trading products (Rozgonjuk et al., 2020), while Instagram limits its benefits mainly to sharing picture or video-based contents (Instagram Inc., 2020). Conceptually, this raises the concern, if, as the fundamentals of marketing hold, the perceived value of consumption could be enhanced by expanding the benefits of use (Kotler and Armstrong, 2016), how could an all-encompassing SNS, such as Facebook, witness a declining trend in comparison to Instagram. Hence, it is puzzling that despite the narrower scope of benefits/uses, Instagram still has been able to maintain growth in the average time spent by users, while Facebook is experiencing the opposite trend.

The downward trend in the popularity of Facebook appears to be prominent among youth (Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Hutchinson, 2021b) who represent the demographic segment that accounts for the major portion of social media users (Hooper, 2012; Jung et al., 2017). One reason identified for the youth community's hesitance to use Facebook is the difficulty of presenting their desired identities, as such identities may contradict the social norms of other communities represented on Facebook (Cho, 2017; McConnell et al., 2017). Further, certain studies have presented findings that affirm a decline in the use of Facebook for self-disclosure activities as users fear being socially discriminated against by others (Bazarova and Choi, 2014; Vitak et al., 2015; Cho, 2017). Thus, it appears that in determining user preference for an SNS, concerns related to one's identity constructed on the SNS could overshadow the greater benefits offered.

One property of any SNS that makes identity construction and self-disclosure difficult is context collapse, which refers to the breakdown of social boundaries that exist in the physical world restricting information flow between different social contexts (Boyd, 2010; Duguay, 2016; Hogan, 2010). Context collapse can be understood in terms of the size and heterogeneity of the community of an SNS (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018), and it is intense on Facebook due to its massive global community (Hamilton, 2022) that comprises diverse social groups. Identity issues created by context collapse on SNSs, and on Facebook in particular, have been discussed in the literature in relation to various subjects such as self-disclosure (Bazarova and Choi, 2014), and sexual identity (Duguay, 2016). Hence in the presence of a plethora of studies discussing how identity and self-disclosure is managed in the face of context collapse (Dennen and Burner, 2017; Gil-Lopez et al., 2018; Triggs et al., 2019), this study attempts to understand and theorize how differences in the intensity of context collapse on the two SNSs have made changes in their popularity.

Accordingly, this paper uses Symbolic Interaction (Mead, 1934) as a theoretical lens to examine the views of Sri Lankan youth on the reasons that have made Instagram more 'youth friendly' compared to Facebook in relation to self-presentation in the face of context collapse. Through the use of symbolic interaction theory, we contribute to the literature on SNSs by discussing how identity formation takes place through social interaction and commonly shared meanings of social interactions – "universes of discourse" (Mead, 1934, p. 89) – and how these processes are differently enabled and hampered by the two SNSs.

The study findings reveal that the Facebook community includes an older generation that subscribes to universes of discourse that clash with those of the younger generation, as well as a large invisible audience (boyd, 2007) that makes it difficult to clearly identify the relevant universes of discourse to draw on in identity construction. In contrast, Instagram has a narrower audience which mostly consists of younger users, which allows them to project desired identities more freely and also more cohesively since the universes of discourse they have to negotiate on Instagram are fewer and clear-cut. This makes Instagram more preferable to youth. These findings indicate the vey popularity of Facebook has turned it into a product catering to a mass market, which has contributed to alienating an important market segment – youth – that considers identity expression as a key benefit when consuming SNSs (Alhabash and Ma, 2017). The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section will present a review of the literature outlining the identity issues related to the context collapse on SNSs and the relevance of the chosen theoretical lens for theorizing these issues. This will be followed by an explanation of the methods followed in the empirical work. Then, findings will be presented with a discussion. The paper will conclude with some implications for knowledge and marketing practices.

Literature Review

Social Networking Sites, Context Collapse and Identity

The nature of human interactions in the 21st century has taken a completely different form consequent to the growth in popularity of SNSs. Among different SNSs available, Facebook, which enables people to publicly interact with one another, has been able to remain the most popular Social Networking Site globally in terms of monthly active users (DataReportal, 2021), although it appears to be losing this popularity (Hamilton, 2022; Hutchinson, 2021a; Deyan, 2022). While Instagram is still behind Facebook, it is growing in popularity (Hutchinson, 2021a; Deyan, 2022) and is considered one of the fastest-growing SNSs (Song *et al.*, 2019). In relation to the study site, the Facebook community in Sri Lanka by January 2021 was recorded to be 7 million, with a quarter-on-quarter increase of 6.1%, while the Instagram community in Sri Lanka was 1.3 million, with a quarter-on-quarter increase of 8.3% (DataReportal, 2021). This denotes that the global trends are prevailing in the research site too: although Facebook is still the more dominant SNS in Sri Lanka, the Instagram community is increasing at a greater rate.

As previously noted, Facebook is losing popularity, and several studies have elucidated that concerns regarding identity and self-disclosure on Facebook is a dominant cause behind the declining usage of Facebook (Bazarova and Choi, 2014; Cho, 2017; McConnell *et al.*, 2017; Vitak *et al.*, 2015). These issues have, at times, been attributed to the context collapse on

Facebook (Bazarova and Choi, 2014; Dennen and Burner, 2017; Duguay, 2016). Context collapse can be defined as a collapse of conventional social boundaries between diverse social groups that restricts the information flow from one social context to another (Boyd, 2010; Duguay, 2016; Hogan, 2010). The identity people construct in a given social context depends on the social norms governing that particular social context (Fox and Moreland, 2015; Fox and Ralston, 2016). However, an SNS where youth might encounter one's parents, teachers, co-workers, friends, and many other associates represents an online space of context collapse where many social settings come together (Dennen & Burner, 2017).

Context collapse can be further examined from the perspective of different 'publics' to whom social behaviours are visible. The 'publics', i.e., the people who can witness one's behaviors in a given situation, could be classified as unmediated, mediated, or networked (Boyd, 2007). One encounters unmediated publics in physical spaces that have structural boundaries. For example, in a classroom, the witnessing 'public' is restricted to those within the walls of the classroom. Mediating technologies such as the mass media increases the scale of who could witness a behavior; thus, expanding the public to multiple 'publics'. Mediated publics often comprise "invisible audiences" and the information available to them tends to be "persistent" and "replicable" (Boyd, 2007, p. 126). SNSs have 'networked publics'; it is a type of 'mediated publics' which has "an additional feature – searchability – while magnifying all of the other properties" (p. 126); it also has a greater capacity to increase the number of publics one is exposed to (Boyd, 2007). Accordingly, one's behaviour on a given SNS is visible to a greater number of communities with diverse social expectations, and some of them may perceive the projected behavior as socially undesirable (Marder *et al*., 2016). An added complexity is that due to the 'invisible' nature of audiences, SNS members have to respond to anticipated or imagined communities (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2014).

Greater heterogeneity of consumers on a network poses more identity issues since the diversity of the audience expectations is greater in such situations (Gil-Lopez *et al*., 2018). Different social communities consume SNSs for different purposes. For example, a study by Alhabash and Ma (2017) identified that youth consume Facebook mainly for self-documentation and self-expression, through which they create life logs and present their identities to peers. Thus, for them, identity construction is a primary activity on SNSs. In contrast, the older community on Facebook consumes Facebook for other purposes, social surveillance being one of them (Jung et al., 2017). This social surveillance, especially by family members of the older generation, imposes considerable restrictions on the youth community. This is not limited to Facebook; for example, similar surveillance of teenage activity by parents has been reported in relation to other SNSs such as My Space (Boyd, 2007). However, currently, there is a greater tendency for the behaviour of youth on Facebook to be observed by the older generations because the presence of older people on Facebook is greater compared to some other SNSs. For example, 77% of people between ages 30-49 years and 51% of those between 50-64 years use Facebook, whereas only 47% of those between 30-49 years and 23% of those between 50-64 years use Instagram (Khoros, 2022). This larger community, prone to surveillance, may lead the youth to feel a need to be cautious about portraying their behavior on Facebook as it might reflect (negatively) on the projected identity.

In discussing the relative freedom and/or restriction afforded by different SNSs for constructing one's identity, it is worth examining some theoretical underpinnings of human identity construction.

Symbolic Interaction and Identity

Human identity is a social product as the cognitive development for identity management occurs as an outcome of social interactions (Mead, 1934; Lucero, 2017). Generally, we present ourselves as desired by others in a given social context, through the social interactions we have with them. Consequently, the identity constructed in a given social context depends on the social norms that govern that particular social context (Fox and Moreland, 2015; Fox and Ralston, 2016). Symbolic interaction provides a theoretical perspective for studying how individuals interpret other people in their lives and how this process of interpretation leads to different behaviour in specific situations (Benzies and Allen, 2001). Hence, according to Mead human self is a process (Blumer, 1966; Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2017) rather than a static existence.

This process of internalizing the expectations of others in society is referred to as role-taking behaviour (Gil-Lopez *et al*., 2018; Mead, 1934). According to the theory of symbolic interaction (Mead, 1934), role-taking behaviour explains a phenomenon where people play the behavioural roles expected by others in society. In other words, they absorb the social expectations of others when determining what kind of a role is ideal to play in each social context – the element of one's self that Mead (1934) calls the "me" (p. 196). Then the "I" (p. 196) element of the self responds to these expectations by playing the ideal role (or by defying it, though this is not the common behaviour). For instance, a student's behavior in front of his/her schoolteachers would be different from his/her behavior before parents, which would again be different from his/her behaviour in front of his/her friends. Hence, people respond to multiple different groups in different contexts differently. The common norms or expectations of a group of individuals or a community who share such attitudes are termed the "generalized other" (Mead, 1934, p. 90), and people construct different selves in response to different generalized others encountered in different contexts (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2017). For presenting diverse identities expected by different generalized others, people utilize groups of symbols and gestures with shared meanings – "universes of discourse" – appropriate for each context and each group of generalized others (Mead, 1934, p. 89).

This behaviour is equally applicable to SNSs. For instance, Gottschalk (2010), who raises questions about interaction, self-presentation, and self-construction in virtual spaces, explores how interactions in social virtual spaces shape the self and everyday life in the digital age. Lynch and McConatha (2006) also discuss how new digital age phenomena contribute to a new understanding of human interaction in the current society, thus extending symbolic interaction into hyper-symbolic interaction where the self is subject to continual redefinition and revision. Further, Robinson (2007) shows how role players incorporate their offline identities into their identities online.

Hence, what users convey on SNSs to others through what they post depends on what they consider as contributing to constructing an acceptable impression (Blackwell *et al*., 2015; Marwick and Boyd, 2014) or identity. For presenting these acceptable identities, users of SNSs have to make use of various 'virtual' gestures and symbols, through the contents they share, that are acceptable to the SNS community. However, SNS spaces with intense context collapse (Dennen and Burner, 2017), comprising multiple networked publics (Boyd, 2007) make this a complicated and difficult task, because in these virtual spaces there are multiple overlapping and conflicting universes of discourse relevant to the different generalized others. The task is further

complicated by having to anticipate the universes of discourses relevant to imagined communities (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Marwick and Boyd, 2014), that the users have to navigate. In this paper, we examine these complexities with reference to Facebook and Instagram.

Methodology

Research Design

The research methodology of the study was governed by the interpretive philosophy. Accordingly, we have taken a subjective ontological stance (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), upholding the view that a given person's identity work on a particular social networking site is an outcome of his/her interpretations of the meanings derived from the use of such platforms. In keeping with these philosophical underpinnings, we adopted a qualitative research approach as it is a strategy of inquiry through which researchers are able to get a deep understanding of social settings and activities as described by participants (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008).

Participants of the Study

In selecting the participants for the study, we considered Sri Lankan youth within the age group of 18 – 34, which represents 59% of the total social media audience in Sri Lanka (DataReportal, 2019; NapoleanCat, 2022), who are active on both Facebook and Instagram as the population for the study. In selecting a sample, we used a purposive sampling technique to select the most suitable set of participants who could provide an adequate amount of rich and relevant data to be analyzed. When selecting the sample, researchers purposively selected individuals belonging to the mentioned age group who maintain both Facebook and Instagram accounts as the study engages in a comparison between the two social networking sites. Given below are the demographic details of the participants of the study.

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Sample

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation
Arjuna	23	M	Undergraduate
Dushanthi	29	F	Assistant Manager
Danesh	21	M	Sales Executive
Dilanka	21	M	Unemployed
Imanthi	23	F	Undergraduate
Hiruni	23	F	Undergraduate
Manel	23	M	Undergraduate
Sudharshana	24	M	Undergraduate
Saman	21	M	Unemployed
Prarthana	29	F	Lecturer

Jeshan	26	M	Manager
Eshani	32	F	Hair Dresser
Minushi	23	F	Undergraduate
Jeewantha	23	M	Undergraduate

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as the method of data collection in which we utilized an interview guide to maintain the flow of the interview. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Each interview on average was 25-30 minutes in length. All interviews were carried out in Sinhalese (the official first language in Sri Lanka) and were transcribed in the same language for data analysis; English translations were performed only for those excerpts used in presenting findings. Sequential steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2013) for a thematic analysis were used to analyze the data collected. Initially, 18 codes were generated; these 18 initial codes were converted into 03 candidate themes which were later refined into 02 overarching themes which have been used to present the findings in the following section. All relevant details regarding the initial codes and themes are presented in Table 02. Table 03 presents the scope of each overarching theme discussed in this paper.

Table 2: Coding and Theme Development

Initial Codes	Unrefined theme	(Refined) Overarching Theme
Nature of the comments, number of interactions, and type of content shared construct identities The level of interactions determines the decency and status Less interactions on Instagram, make it a decent platform	Different forms of interactions derive	Instagram is decent, but Facebook is not
Facebook is used for sharing memes, Instagram for photos Instagram culture supports self-expression Facebook community is toxic Too many people on Facebook limit identity projection and freedom Concern for privacy and availability of a known community is critical in determining which SNS to be used	Youth perceive Facebook and Instagram differently.	
The role of others' response is influential on one's behaviour When presenting content on SNS, the potential for subsequent conversations is considered. Social pressure comes from the family. Maintaining good character is status Even though the social perception is immaterial, a bad character is not acceptable	Social Surveillance determines user behaviour on	Facebook Community is Judgmental

We get influenced by other parties because we depend on
them
Social influence is a critical element in presenting
consumption patterns
Status is a socially created construct
Concerned about how others would judge us
Sri Lankan culture influences our behaviour on SNS

Table 3: Overarching Themes and their Scope

Theme	Scope of the theme
Facebook Community is Judgmental	This theme discusses how the intense diversity of the Facebook community has discouraged the youth from actively engaging with Facebook due to negative perceptions.
Instagram is decent, but Facebook is not	This theme discusses how users interpret the meanings of the interactions in each SNS and how they consider Instagram as presenting clear guidelines for constructing a 'decent' identity.

Findings and Discussion

Similar to any other social context in the physical offline world, SNSs too are social contexts in which users are subject to each other's scrutiny, and thus attempt to present and maintain socially desirable identities in keeping with the social expectations of others present on SNSs (Dennen and Burner, 2017; Hendriks *et al*., 2018). This is evident in how Imanthi and Eshani who are two Facebook users, responded to the question 'are you concerned about what you post on social media?', as presented below:

Imanthi: "I don't do things that are not matching. But before I say something, I think about how others will react to it. Similarly, when I'm uploading a photo, I think about what others would say about it".

Eshani: "I do select before posting. Let's say for example it's a song. Even if it's a song we like, I share it only after seeing who is there in my friend list. Do I have aunts and uncles, is it appropriate? What is the video though we like the song? What would they think after watching it"?

The above excerpts elucidate that, users of SNSs strive to meet the expectations of others on the SNS when posting content just as we try to behave in the offline society as expected by influential others in the society. In doing so, it appears that people attempt to internalize the expectations of others in deciding which behaviour is acceptable and which is not acceptable. Statements such as "I think about how others will react to it" and "… who is there in my friend list. Do I have aunts and uncles?" indicate the role taking behaviour (Gil-Lopez *et al*., 2018) with reference to specific generalized others (Mead, 1934).

However, as previously noted, on SNSs it is difficult for a person to behave as desired by others in the community, because, unlike in the unmediated physical world (Boyd, 2007), there is context collapse (Boyd, 2008; Dennen and Burner, 2017) on SNSs where there is a collapse of spatial boundaries that originally restricted the reach of each social group from witnessing a given person's behaviour in other social contexts which they were not a part of.

In contrast to Costa (2018) whose research participants in Turkey "hadn't come to terms with the emergence of new online spaces that mixed up unrelated social environments" (p. 3642), not only were participants of this study very much aware of the context collapse, but they also identified it to be far more intense on Facebook than on Instagram. This appears to be a key reason why youth tend to prefer Instagram over Facebook because on Instagram the diversity of the audience is relatively narrower and the lesser heterogeneity of the community has posed fewer problems of context collapse (Gil-Lopez *et al*., 2018).

Discussed below are two specific elements of the greater context collapse of Facebook that makes it difficult for the youth to construct an identity approved by multiple, diverse generalized others. First is the greater presence of older users in the Facebook community (Khoros, 2022) who subscribe to a different universe of discourse in determining appropriate behaviour. Second is the invisible audience (Boyd, 2007), leading to imagined communities accompanied by imagined surveillance (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Marwick and Boyd, 2014) resulting from the greater heterogeneity of the Facebook community (Gil-Lopez, 2018). As noted by Robinson (2007), who applies symbolic interactionism to explore self-construction in online environments, for identity performance to be successful the cyber-performer must become literate in the site or community language. As explained by symbolic interactionism, an actor's ability to interpret the social world is central (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2017) for executing appropriate behaviour. However, the greater heterogeneity of the community makes it difficult to identify different 'languages' in operation, necessitating these young users to imagine the universes of discourse relevant to invisible audiences. In contrast, Instagram, which has a younger and more homogeneous community (in the eyes of the participants) presents a clearer universe of discourse that guides them to construct an appropriate identity.

Facebook Community is Judgmental

As previously noted, there is a higher percentage of the older generations on Facebook compared to Instagram. Eshani's reference to 'aunts and uncles' in the earlier quote shows that these youth are conscious of the presence of these elders. This consciousness is heightened because the youth consider the older generation to be judgmental, as expressed by Dushanthi below.

Dushanthi: It's widely different. Now, I don't share the stories I share on Instagram on Facebook. On Facebook, I have lot of [older] relatives who would start imagining certain things like I am in a relationship so and so. I don't have a boyfriend. Like they are judgmental. Facebook is slightly more judgmental.

Jeshan expressed his thoughts about this broader diversity on Facebook as follows:

> [On Instagram] I have a lot of friends; they do a lot of fun stuff. So, I also stay fun. Share such fun moments. But on Facebook of course it's less, because relatives and family friends are there. They do judge. I don't like them judging. On Facebook, I share something ordinary and minor which looks more decent; like incidents from my basic life, work life, and photos with family. On Instagram of course I show everything. Not showing, I mean present my fun life…on Facebook now, even grandmothers are there basically. Instagram, I mean in Sri Lanka, I feel people like us, people who think in the same way are present. On Facebook, you have every Tom, Dick, and Harry.

The identity tensions that arise due to the preference of youth to use SNSs for self-expression (Alhabash and Ma, 2017) and the preference of older users to utilize SNSs for social surveillance (Jung et al., 2017) are apparent in the above quote. Some of the social norms which drive behaviour patterns of the youth on SNSs are judged as inappropriate by users belonging to older generations. Given the greater context collapse on Facebook in terms of the age diversity of the community, the 'judgmental' nature of the older community is extended to the SNS – Facebook is more judgmental than Instagram. As shown by the previous quotes, this perception clearly restricts the freedom for self-expression: "On Facebook, I share something ordinary and minor which looks more decent; like incidents from my basic life, work life and photos with family… Not showing …my fun life… on Facebook". In contrast, as Instagram represents a younger community who share similar social expectations, youth can reveal themselves more freely than on Facebook: "On Instagram of course I show everything… I feel as people like us, people who think in the same way are present".

The presence of large 'invisible audiences' is the second aspect of the context collapse on Facebook. This is one of the key differences between unmediated and mediated publics where mediating technologies have enabled 'invisible audiences' to witness one's behaviours, and this characteristic is magnified when the publics are networked (Boyd, 2007). It appears that this too is more intense on Facebook than on Instagram. Jeshan's reference to "every Tom, Dick, and Harry" above is a good example. Jeewantha below talks about the invisible nature of the audience explicitly.

Jeewantha: Facebook has people that I don't know. Then I can't maintain my privacy. I know everyone on my Instagram. So, I don't get damaged by sharing things on Instagram.

Manel also behaves differently on the two social networking sites;

> If you come to Instagram, I like to behave as an entertaining person, a person who travels, and a person who enjoys life, not a professional life. Bit playful, more towards entertainment is what is maintained on Instagram. When it comes to Facebook its bit less. What was there, I changed a bit with the university [after entering university] and because I am about to go to the corporate world. So, the behaviour on Facebook is bit different. I am bit selective when sharing a post or uploading a post, and I reveal less about myself on Facebook.

Although Manel doesn't refer to the invisibility of the audience explicitly, his statement "What was there I changed a bit with the university [after entering university] and because I am about to go to the corporate world" shows that he is conscious of wider, unknown, or at least little-known audiences and is responding to 'imagined audiences' and 'imagined surveillance' (Duffy and Chan, 2019). Since his Facebook profile includes his schoolteachers, university lecturers,

and even prospective employers as friends, he tends to be more concerned about what he posts on Facebook. However, on Instagram, he lives his playful life (which appears to represent his 'authentic' personal values and attitudes towards life) by actively creating content that portrays himself as an entertaining person.

As shown above, the intensity of the context collapse or the presence of various social groups is relatively high on Facebook while it is much lower on Instagram. Hence, young users of SNSs find it relatively comfortable to consume Instagram rather than Facebook. Consequently, these young users present two different identities on the two SNSs and they appear to consider the identity constructed on Instagram as more 'authentic' while that presented on Facebook is more constrained. It is difficult for a person to present various identities to suit the expectations of diverse social groups on Facebook where at times, it is difficult even to clearly identify what some groups in the community might expect of one. Therefore, these users tend to share limited digital content that they expect would be acceptable to everyone and hold themselves back from sharing content that expresses their 'true identity' expansively.

This behaviour of the youth in responding to these diverse audiences exhibits a 'lowest common denominator' approach (Hogan, 2010). Hogan (2010) explains the 'lowest common denominator' as digital content which are acceptable to everyone, and does not contradict the social norms of anyone on the given SNSs: as stated by Imanthi, 'I don't do things that are not matching'. In the parlance of symbolic interaction, these youth painstakingly search for content representing overlaps between the many diverse universes of discourse (Mead, 1934) relevant to the divergent socio-demographic generalized others present on Facebook: "Do I have aunts and uncles, is it appropriate? What is the video though we like the song? What would they think after watching it"?" (Eshani).

Of course, as explained in symbolic interactionism, it is possible for an individual to assert oneself and strive for "freedom from conventions" (Mead, 1934, p. 199). This is done by standing in opposition to a given universe of discourse and deliberately drawing on a different universe, where "one appeals from fixed conventions… to others on the assumption that there is a group of organized others that answer to one's own appeal" (Mead, 1934, p. 199). However, in order to draw on a different universe of discourse, one needs to be able to clearly identify a particular universe of discourse that appeals to another group of generalized others.. This is difficult due to the size and heterogeneity (Gil-Lopez *et al.*, 2018) of the Facebook community which necessitates one to imagine not only the audiences who engage in surveillance (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Marwick and Boyd, 2014) but also the relevant universes of discourse. This essentially reduces one's literacy of the community language(s) (Robinson, 2007) and makes it difficult to confidently draw on an opposing universe of discourse.

As a result, the youth employ strict self-surveillance and content management (Duffy and Chan, 2019). As identified in previous research, due to the size and heterogeneity of the community, these youth limit "self-disclosures to ordinary, day-to-day personal anecdotes" (Gil-Lopez *et al.*, 2018, p. 139): "I share something ordinary … like incidents from my basic life, work life and photos with family" (Jeshan). This leads to the construction of an identity that they consider inauthentic: "I reveal less about myself on Facebook" (Manel).

Instagram is decent, but Facebook is not

In addition to the diversity in expectations of different social groups which influence user behavior on SNSs, another key insight of the study was that the relatively low context collapse on Instagram appears to have resulted in a more cohesive set of norms compared to Facebook. This has resulted in a more positive perception of Instagram as an SNS on which one could construct a 'decent' identity.

A commonly shared perspective among the participants regarding Instagram was that it is 'decent' and 'posh', while Facebook was inferior in such means. These youth tend to believe that following the behavioral standards maintained on Instagram provides a decent identity to its users which allows them the possibility of presenting themselves as 'posh' and 'decent' individuals. It was identified that the differences in the manner of commenting, the type of content posted, the size of the audience as well as the frequency of interactions with one another have caused Facebook to be regarded as a less decent SNS by the informants.

For example, Arjuna emphasized the differences between the two communities on Facebook and Instagram as follows:

> Two different communities mean, perhaps Instagram doesn't have a broader community as Facebook. Instagram is very exclusive. Even the group on Instagram does not chat much. It's not like Facebook. There is a belief that Instagram is more decent. Sri Lanka has such a belief; I have such a belief.

Further explaining his stance about the decentness of the Instagram community, Arjuna further stated,

> On Facebook, we share any content most of the time, the community there is like that. I guess, on Instagram, people behave in a more decent manner. Even when uploading a story or posting a picture, I guess there is some need to maintain some quality.

Confirming Arjuna's perspective on how the differences in the manner of interactions determine the decency of the SNSs, Hiruni stated,

> On Facebook, when we comment, we are like any other. We comment on friends' posts as we talk to them. But on Instagram, we don't comment much. Don't go on liking.

Further, in support of differences in norms of use between Facebook and Instagram, Sudharshana stated,

> How people behave on Instagram is different. Community there is bit posh. Even when posting contents, they don't just post any content. They post the best photo they have.

Behaviour patterns such as not sharing memes or offensive posts, and not engaging in continuous conversations through the messaging option or comments on the posts, have made Instagram an SNS that is perceived as decent. Accordingly, a person who adopts these behaviour patterns could present a 'decent' identity or even enhance his/her social standing (as 'posh') on Instagram. This is also assisted by the functional affordances of Instagram, in addition to the codes of conduct discussed above. This is evidenced below in an excerpt from the interview with Dilanka.

> Now on Facebook, we can put any meme, any filth, anything, we share those. On Instagram, we cannot do something like that. If we are posting, that'll be stories. So, if you look between the two, through Instagram with photos posted, you cannot easily predict a person whether he is rich, poor, a serious fellow or a fun type fellow. If you

go to Instagram, Instagram is all photos. If you go to Facebook, anyone would understand that this fellow is someone fun who stays fun and a person who speaks openly. The reason for that is, you can share anything, have any caption you want.

As presented above, youth prefer to use Instagram as it appears to portray more decency compared to Facebook. Analyzing this further, digital content such as memes and posts or even excessive interactions are interpreted by the participants as actions that negatively affect the decency of an SNS profile. Accordingly, as Facebook involves many such contents which are interpreted as indecent by these users, its popularity as an SNS appears to be negatively affected. Due to the absence of such content on Instagram, as well as the behavioural standards maintained by the Instagram community, youth seem to perceive Instagram as a youth-friendly social networking site in which they could present a decent and enhanced identity of themselves.

The quotes presented above refer to various 'social objects' (Mead, 1934) that are utilized by SNS users, such as memes, photos, captions, stories, etc. How one behaves towards a social object – the "gestures" (Mead, 1934, p. 46) one makes – are contingent on the meanings one associate with the object. The meaning associated with an object is a core tenet of symbolic interactionist thought (Blumer, 1969), and when "these gestures or symbols have the same or common meanings for all members of [a] group" (Mead, 1934, p. 89) they constitute a universe of discourse relevant for that group (Mead, 1934). The above quotes regarding how users behave towards different social objects indicate that there is greater clarity and agreement among participants regarding the meanings associated with objects, i.e., content, shared, on Instagram than on Facebook. In other words, there is a more clear-cut, commonly accepted universe of discourses (Mead, 1934) governing the behaviour on Instagram, which has a smaller and less heterogeneous community (Gil-Lopez *et al.*, 2018) compared to Facebook. In consequence, there is also a more clear-cut meaning associated with the collection of social objects which itself constitutes a larger social object, namely, the SNS – hence the perception 'Instagram is decent'.

Interestingly, when comparing these views with the participant quotes given in the previous section, it appears that this very existence of a clear-cut universe of discourse guiding the users to exercise restraint and 'decency' has accorded them greater freedom for self-expression on Instagram than the multiple, sometimes conflicting, and sometimes imagined universes of discourses present on Facebook which are difficult to navigate. It is also noteworthy that both Arjuna and Sudharshana refer to the SNS community explicitly and Arjuna goes as far as referring to the "broader community of Facebook". This implies that these users consciously link the lack of a clear set of norms, i.e., a universe of discourse, to the heterogeneity (Gil-Lopez *et al.*, 2018) of the SNSs.

Conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to explore the contribution of identity construction complexities in the face of context collapse toward users' preferences for different SNSs. This was done by examining, through the theoretical lens of symbolic interaction, the reasons for the diminishing popularity of Facebook compared to Instagram.

The key contribution of this paper was in theorizing the identity tensions raised by context collapse on SNSs. The findings indicate that due to the greater context collapse on Facebook, young users are confronted with multiple, diverse 'generalized others' subscribing to multiple different and sometimes conflicting 'universes of discourse' (Mead, 1934). In other words, the heterogeneity (Gil-Lopez *et al*., 2018) of the community has increased identity issues. In particular, for youth, the 'age heterogeneity' of the Facebook community creates discomfort and they consider Facebook as comparatively more judgmental than Instagram due to the greater presence of the older generation who are prone to social surveillance (Jung *et al*., 2017). The larger and more heterogeneous community (Gil-Lopez *et al*., 2018) also results in a larger 'invisible audience' (Boyd, 2007) whose expectations are not always clear. In consequence, the youth present somewhat bland, seemingly 'inauthentic' (in their own eyes) identities on Facebook. Especially in the face of imagined audiences (Marwick and Boyd, 2014) and imagined surveillance (Duffy and Chan, 2019), which necessitates one to imagine which universes of discourses are operating, it is difficult to even identify the 'lowest common denominator' (Hogan, 2010). Therefore, the youth have little recourse other than to exercise strict self-surveillance and content management (Duffy and Chan, 2019). In contrast, Instagram, which has a narrower and younger community, has less context collapse in terms of both size and heterogeneity (Gil-Lopez, 2018), and therefore, presents a clearer universe of discourse for the youth to draw on; this enables them to construct a more expansive and authentic identity while abiding by the norms of the community.

In terms of practical implications, ironically, it appears that it is the very popularity of Facebook that is now working against it by creating greater context collapse. Facebook, whose massive audience comprises users of widely varied socio-demographic characteristics, is losing traction with its younger generation of users, amidst a rising crop of other social networking Sites (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) which have continued growing in popularity with young people. When viewed from basic marketing premises this is not a surprising phenomenon. Facebook, now, is essentially catering to a mass market, which is a marketing practice that has been long abandoned by most businesses (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Once again, ironically, it is the same rapid developments of information and communication technology that enabled "mass customization" (Kotler and Keller, 2012, p. 329) that is now turning the SNSs into undifferentiated mass markets. For the moment Instagram is catering to a narrower market. However, from the findings of this study, it does not appear to be through any planned marketing approach, but simply because it is relatively new. This may be the case with other new SNSs as well.

This study, therefore, is an eye-opener for SNS platform providers. The very nature of SNSs is that they enable any user to opt-in and out. However, from segmentation, targeting, positioning (STP), and value proposition perspectives, which are the most basic principles in marketing (Kolter and Keller, 2012), context collapse created by attracting the masses appears to be creating problems for SNS providers. Hence, they need to go beyond attracting users and find ways to mitigate these issues created by context collapse. Facebook is still the mammoth among SNSs, but one should remember that mammoths are an extinct species today.

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