'Mom, I’m growing old’: Time and age-identity marking on Facebook

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Facebook’s automatic timestamps and the 'Timeline' metaphor imply an objective representation of life created out of moments. Yet, the sense of identity linked to time is actively constructed, and is done in interaction with other people. Viewing time as a significant orientation device for the self (Georgakopoulou 2003), the questions that confront me in this paper are: How do Facebook users position themselves in time? What are the different ways they conceive and value time?

To this end, I have adopted a discourse-centered online ethnographic approach (Androutsopoulos 2008), which combines the systematic and longitudinal observation of Facebook profiles with the direct engagement with their owners. I present and discuss a Facebook post, comprised of a status update, a video link and 11 comments from a Greek female user’s Timeline, complemented with her own interpretation of the interaction. In my analysis, informed by Coupland et al. (1991), I focus on age as a subjective and emotional way of perceiving time looking at instances of explicit and implicit references to ageing and age labeling.

The stability of identity depends partly on having a working interactional space of the present in which to be stable (Jenkins 2002). For many, Facebook can undertake the role of this interactional space. Through posting songs, writing comments and liking, Facebook participants appeal to shared experiences, recollect memories and feel nostalgia, recall past tastes and habits, generate individual and collective present, past and future identities, and evoke certain periods of life through a gamut of intertextual references. Age identities are projected, challenged, endorsed, and collaboratively negotiated in front of a viewing Facebook audience. As such, they should not be considered as mere chronological facts but as socially established processes, as contextualized interactional accomplishments (Poulios 2009).

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