

# Negotiating Multiple Audiences of L2 Learners on Facebook: Navigating Parallel Realities

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Received: May 3, 2016

Accepted: June 5, 2016

Online Published: September 22, 2016

doi:10.5539/ies.v9n10p95

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n10p95>

## Abstract

As social network sites have become popular with university students, it is easier to understand how students employ social network sites seamlessly in their academic and personal lives. L2 learners often employ Facebook to improve their English language proficiency by communicating with their native and non-native English speakers. Facebook is considered as collapsed contexts where L2 learners navigate with their numerous multiple audiences at the same time. The study investigated the strategies L2 learners negotiate multiple audiences on Facebook. The study employed a qualitative multiple case study of three L2 learners who were Facebook users. The participants' Facebook accounts were observed for 14 weeks, and they were interviewed using semi-structured interview. The findings of the study suggest that L2 learners use four strategies to navigate their multiple audiences such as participating in closed Facebook group discussions, only commenting on relevant posts, constructing different online identities and choosing the language of the posts and comments depending on the audience. The audience management strategies used by L2 learners are determined by the informants' personal preferences.

**Keywords:** multiple audiences, identities, L2 learners, higher education, Facebook

## 1. Introduction

Facebook's aim is to connect all Facebook users and to connect the users' offline connections with their online connections. As a result, Facebook is considered as networked publics which are restructured by networked technologies (Boyd, 2010). Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) said Facebookers use Facebook to construct new relationships apart from their existing relationships. On Facebook, L2 learners deal with multiple audiences at the same time as they communicated with their instructors, parents, coursemates, personal friends and potential employers at the same time. On Facebook, the users need to negotiate with various audiences which they often use their imagined audience acts as a mental image of the people they are communicating with. Their imagined audiences serve as the guide of the acceptable norm what to share when the audiences are unknown or visually present (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Quinn, 2014). However, the users' imagined audiences may differ from actual audiences. A user might write his/her Facebook post for her personal friends, but once she posted it, the readers might consist of her colleagues and acquaintances who might think the content is too personal and inappropriate for them. This is because different audiences have different expectations of relevant and appropriate norms (Farnham & Churchill, 2011; Nissenbaum, 2009).

The converging and collapsed context contexts influence L2 learners to reconsider the audiences and their identities. Facebook causes collapsed contexts as Facebook makes it difficult for the users to use different identities for different groups of people and individuals (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Therefore, L2 learners embrace many identities. The identities shifted from one context to another.

There are many studies on the need for audience management strategies for L2 learners due to the collapsed contexts which forced L2 learners to face multiple audiences at the same time (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). It is essential for curriculum designers and educators to be aware of the strategies L2 learners adopt in navigating their multiple audiences on Facebook to design and implement learning activities on Facebook. How do they deal with the presence of multiple audiences successfully?

## 2. Literature Review

L2 learners need more communicative opportunities and to engage with other speakers to receive and give feedbacks to acquire the target language (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Unfortunately, they have fewer opportunities communicating in English with native speakers (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). Communicating with the target language community on Facebook allow L2 learners to the pragmatic norms and language used by native speakers while L2 learners enjoyed interacting with their peers and used self-disclosure strategy on Facebook which deepen their friendships (Blattner, Fiori, & Roulon, 2009).

Facebook has invisible audiences as they are not active contributors, and they are co-present. Collapsed contexts occur when the lack of spatial, social and time boundaries contribute to the inability to differentiate social contexts as the public and private spheres becoming seamlessly. Boyd (2008) refers to the new interaction structure resulting from an increasingly mediated form of sociality as “networked publics,” with the key interaction media being social network sites where networked public must manage invisible audiences, context collapse, and the blurring of private and public (Boyd, 2010). Litt and Hargittai (2016) indicate that there are not many studies conducted on the imagined audience of Facebook users.

Healey, Hanson-Smith, Hubbard, Ioannou-Georgiou, Kessler and Ware (2011) indicate that communication on Facebook requires them to display their understanding and respect towards various cultures, communities and contexts on Facebook in their private and public communication on Facebook. Acts of disrespect and misunderstandings of intercultural and intracultural behaviours may damage Facebook relationships (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012) and the most frequent causes of the breakdown of Facebook friendships are refusing Friending requests, deleting posts, comments and tags (Tokunaga, 2011). Appropriateness of Facebook responses depends on the contexts (Williams, 2008; Belshaw, 2011). William (2008) indicates that Facebook users manage several online identities and manage their behaviours according to their target audience. In addition, the users need to display sensitive with the cultures of their Facebook friends as their Facebook usage is influenced by their cultures (Dou, 2011). Rather, L2 learners need to be taught to use Facebook safely and appropriately according to the norms of Facebook (Prichard, 2013; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011).

Facebook allows its users to experiment with multiple identities in many communities in appropriate ways to their particular audience (Iskold, 2012). Chang and Sperling (2014) in a qualitative case study of six ESL students and an instructor at a community college in an online group discussion. The lessons consisted of mini-lessons of reading and writing in English. It shows the participants use different voices to symbolize their different identities for different audiences.

Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, and Lampe (2011) listed three strategies for controlling Facebook audience such as friending behaviours, using privacy setting and making known of the website. Kim and Lee (2011) warn that Facebook users can employ honest self-disclosure which is aided by honest self-representation to get the support of their Facebook friends. Sundén (2003) says Facebook profiles allow users to construct their imagined identities as they wrote a description of themselves such as their age, location, hobbies and affiliations. Other Facebook users use Facebook activities to manage their multiple identities (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009).

Iskold (2015) anticipates *users' friends' lists* acted as their imagined audience who directed the norms of behaviours for users. Other Facebook users show their multiple identities on Facebook through their posts (Wang, 2015). Kramsch (2006) predicts university students need to develop pragmatic, symbolic and communicative proficiency to navigate personal and professional demands as social network sites become seamlessly intertwined in their lives. Whereas, Limbu (2012) advocates that Facebook exposes university students to digital dialogues where they globalise local contents and localise globalised contents. The students also argued for and against the contents they negotiate and share on Facebook that made them critical Facebook users as they collaborate and write their points of views to reach wider audiences. Litt and Hargittai (2016) reveal that Facebook users cope with multiple audiences by having imagined audience consisted of general and specific imagined audiences who consisted of personal, professional, communal and illustory ties. Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) increase the users' self-confidence as they receive self-validation when they receive likes, comments and shared of their postings from their Facebook friends (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2008).

## 3. The Study

### 3.1 Research Objective

The study aims to achieve its objective:

- 1) What are the strategies used by the participants to negotiate their multiple audiences?

### 3.2 Research design

The study employed a qualitative multiple case study because a qualitative multiple case study highlighted the similarities and differences between and within cases to determine the strategies used by the participants to navigate their multiple audiences on Facebook.

### 3.3 Participants

Three Facebook users volunteered to participate in the study. They were diploma students at University K, and they were between 19 to 21 years old. The participants consisted of one male and two female students. The study employed purposive sampling with criterion type of sampling as the participants were selected based on the criteria; (a) Facebook users, (b) diploma students of University K and (c) pass at least one English course at the university, as the strategy ensured the quality of the study (Creswell, 2013). Their levels of English proficiency ranged between intermediate to upper intermediate. The participants were the researcher's Facebook friends, and they volunteered for the study. Table 1 shows the profiles of the participants.

Table 1. Profiles of the participants

Nickname	Gender	Age	Level
Seroja	F	20	Upper Intermediate
Lekir	M	20	Intermediate
Mawar	F	20	Intermediate

### 3.4 Research Context

The study was conducted in a state campus of Universiti K in Malaysia. The state campus was located in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia and the medium of instruction is English. The state campus had more than 7000 students and offered diploma, degree and postgraduate courses. The study also included the participants' Facebook. The researcher was a staff at the university.

### 3.5 Data Collection Procedures

The participants' Facebook were observed for 14 weeks and after the end of the online observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each participant was interviewed once for 30 minutes. The interview was conducted at the researcher's office in the university. Only the data from semi-structured interview were included in the study. The interview was transcribed verbatim. After the interviews were transcribed, then the study employed member checking when the researcher showed the transcripts of the semi-structured interview to the participants so they could determine the accuracy of the interview.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Only the data from semi-structured interview were included in this study. The data were managed by Atlas.ti 7. Data were analysed using two cycles coding methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The study also used peer debriefing when a qualified qualitative researcher was asked to examine the interview's transcripts and compared recorded interviews. The peer debriefer employed the themes used by the researchers to review the coding of the data.

## 4. Results

The findings of the study are illustrated in term of the strategies given by the participants to manage their multiple audiences based on the research question:

### 4.1 What Are the Strategies Used by the Participants to Negotiate Their Multiple Audiences?

The data suggest four strategies that the participants employed in navigating their multiple audiences on Facebook:

#### 4.1.1 Participating in Facebook Groups

Seroja, Mawar, and Lekir reveal that they only participated in Facebook groups as they were more comfortable disclosing their personal details in closed circle of friends. Seroja admitted that she did not know all her many Facebook friends, so she did not disclose her personal views and details to them. However, she confessed she was more personal to her Facebook group friends as she considered they were her real friends as she knew them so she was more comfortable with them. She described:

Extract 1

In Fb group...I am a bit friendly because we know each other but on Fb itself..I am not friendly as most of my friends are outsiders I don't really know them..I have a lot of FB friends...there are different circles...Fb...FB groups...where friends that I know...then the real Seroja. (Seroja)

Seroja highlighted that she set different layers of Facebook friendships where she reserved closer Facebook relationships to Facebook groups which can be secret or closed groups. In her Facebook groups, she knew all her friends closer than on the news feeds. Her intended audience consisted of friends that she knew and trusted.

Similarly, Mawar implemented the same strategy. However, Mawar specifically mentioned the group that she was comfortable would be a closed group as she knew all the members in real life and for a long time. She realised that she only revealed her true character with her offline friends who were also her Facebook friends because she knew them in real life and for many years. Thus, she disclosed her real character to her friends in her Facebook groups as she trusted them. Mawar described:

Extract 2

Certain groups that I join, I will reveal my real character..identity In my ex school...primary school group...they knew me since I am in Year 1...they know the real me...a happy person...talkative...friendly and not easy to get angry and easy to cool down...they know me better... (Mawar)

Mawar projected her intended audience consisted of her close friends whom she knew since her primary school. The close relationships she developed with her primary school friends were maintained through Facebook and she was comfortable being herself on Facebook on the closed door of her closed Facebook groups.

Lekir too was comfortable communicating in a closed Facebook group. However, Lekir's group comprised of foreign Facebook friends who were photography enthusiasts who communicated in English to discuss photography. They had to discuss in English as the language was the lingua franca of the group. Lekir explained:

Extract 3

It is a closed group...Photography group...They discuss in English as they are international group. (Lekir)

Lekir was confident that his group members were only interested in the photography as the topic was the glue connecting all the members. Thus, the members would not be interested in his private details. Lekir's intended audience was the members of his Photography closed group.

## 4.1.2 Commenting Only on Relevant Posts

One of the effective strategies all the participants employed was commenting only on relevant posts. The relevancy of the posts depended on the participants' personal choices. Seroja only commented when the posts were directly related to her when her friends tagged her or when she felt connected to the posts. Seroja clarified:

Extract 4

I only comment on posts that are related to me and I think that when I need to comment, I will comment. Because I only post on serious matters and did not post about my feelings or not serious matters (Seroja)

Seroja only commented on posts that are serious such as academic topics or current issues. She refrained from discussing her personal feelings and trivial topics. She wrote for her intended audiences who consisted of her academic-oriented peers and professionals.

The sentiment was echoed by Mawar as she only commented on academic topics as she wanted to share her opinions on these academic topics. She wanted her Facebook friends to benefit from her posts. Mawar shared her view:

Extract 5

Because if I found the post is interesting and the point is relevant to my life , I will comment to the post. I want to give the opinion and my suggestion to the point. I will respond to the comment. For example they post about something that is related to student then I as a student have the responsibility to post so I could share my ideas and opinions about the matters they are discussing. I always post something that is useful to others so they could have the benefits from my post so they could learn something. (Mawar)

Mawar took her identity as a university student seriously that even on Facebook she only commented on topics

which were appropriate to university students. She wanted to share her ideas and opinions about topics that were useful to her audiences. She painted her audiences as her coursemates and university students.

Lekir employed his strategy to only commenting on the posts that were relevant to him. He considered that the topics were related to him if the posts were about his offline friends and common offline activities. Lekir stated:

Extract 6

I feel that I need to do that. I think the post is not related to me, I will not comment on it. Mostly about my friends and the things that we do. For example the events that we have done. Last Sunday we had dinner, there were so many postings about the dinner. (Lekir)

Lekir negotiated his multiple audiences by limiting his audiences by concentrating on the posts that were related to him. He only commented on the posts that were personally connected to him by his personal friends who were his offline friends. His imagined audiences were offline friends who were his Facebook friends.

#### 4.1.3 Constructing Different Online Identities

All the participants used different online identities when they were on Facebook. This decision was influenced by their personal reasons. Seroja perceived that she created a different identity for her online persona. She described herself as a talkative person in real life as she loved talking to her friends, but she realised that she more reserved on Facebook. She explained:

Extract 7

A bit different because in Fb, I am not very talkative. Fb Seroja is not talkative, I am serious. Quiet. (Seroja)

Seroja perceived Facebook Seroja was a serious and quiet person. Seroja purposely created a serious identity on Facebook. She felt that her intended audience was serious people and professionals.

Similar to Seroja, Mawar realised that she constructed a different identity for her Facebook identity. She confessed that she was a friendly person who disclosed personal information to her friends in real life. However, she was more secretive and mature on Facebook. She was cautious. She described:

Extract 8

Because when I am online...I will be more mature.I will think many times before I say something then if I am offline, I just be friendly. I can talk and share everything anything can keep secret can share problems. I am more careful online because once you say can influence others...make others hurt...you don't know so when somebody hurts...words...we will have difficulties in our lives (Mawar)

It was interesting to note that Mawar was careful with her Facebook influence on her Facebook friends. She was cautious of not hurting her friends and influencing her friends on making bad decisions by posting comments that could hurt her friends. She was careful with her words so she refused to hurt her Facebook friends' feelings with hurtful and trivial comments. Her imagined audience consisted of serious people and easily impressionable peers.

Lekir echoed similar sentiment voiced by Seroja and Mawar. He realised that he seemed like a understated person on his Facebook. He was not a quiet person in real life as his quiet portrayal on Facebook since he only commented on certain Facebook friends' status. He said:

Extract 9

A quiet person. Because depends on the status and sometimes I like...sometimes not...rarely comment (Lekir)

He further elaborated that if he did not comment on the status, he would just like the status or just lurked. His imagined audience was his personal real life friends who were on Facebook.

#### 4.1.4 Choosing the Language of the Posts/Comments Depending on the Audience

Only Mawar and Lekir employed the strategy of choosing the language of the posts and comments depending on the audience. These two participants tried to be sensitive to their imagined audience. Mawar purposively separated his audience to several categories. She would use Bahasa Malaysia if she wanted her posts to be read by most of her Facebook friends as most of her Facebook friends are Malaysians. She elaborated:

Extract 10

I choose BM in my comment if I want to say to all...And I will use English in my posts and comments



if I have to post something that is related to English...when I don't want people to know my feelings. Usually when we talk in English, it is academic. In Bahasa Malaysia...about personal issues or current issues (Mawar)

Mawar would use English for academic purposes and she wrote the posts for her coursemates and other university students who were her Facebook friends. Meanwhile she shared her views on personal and current issues in Bahasa Malaysia to share these views with most with Malaysians. However, she expressed her feelings in English to limit her audience since not many of her Facebook friends would know her feelings as they were not fluent in English. Mawar chose the languages of her posts to respect her imagined audiences and to limit her multiple audiences.

Meanwhile, Lekir admitted that he preferred using Bahasa Malaysia to communicate on his Facebook as most of his Facebook friends communicated in Bahasa Malaysia. However, he emphasised that his responses depended on the language used by his Facebook friends' status or comments as he was comfortable using either English or Bahasa Malaysia on Facebook. He chose the language of his Facebook responses out of respect for his friends. He justified:

#### Extract 11

I choose BM because I prefer to communicate in Bahasa Malaysia. In groups if the person comments in Bahasa Malaysia...I will reply in Bahasa Malaysia. But if they comment in English, I will use English. Depends on comments. I am comfortable talking English to everyone if they are comfortable talking in English. If they respond in Malay, I will change my English to Malay. I don't often talk English in the campus because my friends often talk in Malay. I don't want them to think I am a show off (laugh nervously)...I am comfortable talking English with Malay friends outside of campus. (Lekir)

He realised that most of his friends in the campus were uncomfortable communicating in English on Facebook. He was sensitive to his friends' needs by accommodating the language used by his friends. In addition, he did not want to be known as a braggart as he realised that his friends on campus who were also his Facebook friends were more comfortable using Bahasa Malaysia. He used English more often with his Facebook friends who were not his campus mates. Lekir showed that he was aware that he had multiple audiences that his imagined audiences comprised of his peers who were bilinguals.

### **5. Discussions and Conclusions**

The findings showed that Mawar and Lekir used all four strategies to negotiate their multiple audiences so they were able to fulfil the expectations of their imagined audience. Whereas, Seroja used only three strategies to navigate her multiple audiences. The most popular strategies were participating only in Facebook groups, commenting only on relevant posts and constructing different online identities. The least popular strategy was choosing the language of the status and comments depending on the audience.

The first strategy shared by all the participants is commenting only on participating only in Facebook groups to limit their multiple audiences. Lekir, Seroja and Mawar treated their Facebook friends differently as they used Facebook groups to differentiate their levels of friendships. Seroja and Mawar disclosed personal information to their close real offline friends whom they retained their friendships through Facebook in Facebook groups. The findings concur with Dey, Jelveh, and Ross' (2012) study that indicate the females are more susceptible to privacy and their privacy was their personal decisions. Lekir used an interest-based Facebook group to be connected to as he depended on the members were focused on their common interest than personal matters. Lampe, Vitak, Gray, and Ellison (2012) indicate Facebook users seek for information. Stutzman, Gross, and Acquisti (2013) emphasise that Facebook users increase their privacy-setting behaviours by limiting data shared with their Facebook friends that they were not close. Reid (2011) used Facebook closed-groups function to build relationships, communicate and share experience for academic purposes where students are engaged and responsible for their learning where L2 learners exercise their critical literacies and electronic literacies while exercising their writing skills. Limiting their personal data to their chosen Facebook groups acts as a privacy setting behaviour for the informants. At the same time, this privacy-setting behaviour allows the participants to restrict their multiple audiences and ensure them to reach the expectations of their imagined audience. The participants' fear for their privacy was supported by a study conducted by Hamedi and Samira (2015) that claim that Malaysian students use Facebook to investigate their friends' social lives.

The second strategy is commenting only on relevant posts. Seroja and Mawar only posted and commented on serious topics appropriate for university students. Seroja was interested in serious academic topics and current

issues. Meanwhile, Mawar only invested in academic topics as she was a university student. Whereas, Lekir limited his communication on the posts and comments with his personal offline friends who were also his Facebook friends. The online relationships are a continuation of his offline relationships. Online relationships are the extension of offline relationships (Spiliotopoulos & Oakley, 2013; Yang & Brown, 2013). On Facebook, tagging friends' pictures, liking their comments or updating status are Facebook activities act to maintain the relationships (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011).

The third strategy is all the participants purposely constructed different online identities on Facebook. Seroja and Lekir intentionally created their Facebook identities as quiet persons. They projected their Facebook identities by not commenting on the posts often. They confessed that they were talkative in their offline settings. In addition, Seroja constructed her identity as a serious person. Mawar created her identity as a cautious person as she was cautious with her posts because she realised that her words could abuse her friends. The findings correlate with other studies that show Facebook users assume different online identities from their actual identities (Hongladarom, 2011; Baym, 2010) as the users can experiment with many identities that are unavailable in their actual lives.

The fourth strategy is the least popular strategy chosen by Mawar and Lekir who chose the language depending on the audience. Both Mawar and Lekir were tactful with their imagined audience as they respected their bilingual audiences' choice of the language used in their status and comments. Mawar used English to express her emotions as many of her Facebook friends were unable to decipher her feelings as her emotions were written in English. Furthermore, Mawar used English to discuss her academic matters with her Facebook friends as the language of the instruction at her university is English so she expected her university mates were able to converse in English regarding academic topics. Lekir was aware that his friends on campus were uncomfortable communicating in English on Facebook. Therefore, his choice of language was determined by his friends' Facebook posts and comments. Marder, Joinson, and Shankar (2012) explain the need for audience segregation as one of the effective strategies to manage audience on Facebook.

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies used by L2 learners to negotiate multiple audiences they face on Facebook. The study shows L2 learners in this study show four strategies to negotiate their multiple audiences based on their personal preferences.

### Acknowledgments

The researchers thank Universiti Utara Malaysia for its support.

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