



## Conference Paper

# "Face Work" on Social Media – Implementing the Theory of Face Work in the Context of Women's Personal Conflict on Social Media

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## Abstract

This study observed the way in which Indonesian women experienced face works on social media, particularly Instagram. The main locus of Face Work theory is at the interpersonal level of communication. However, the substantial development and the interactive nature of social media have established the platform for implementing face works' elements in the context of social media. Thus, the primary objective of research was to *explain the way in which Indonesian women expressing face works in the contexts of personal conflicts on social media*. The theoretical framework of this research drew on Goffman's thought of face works. Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis was used to reveal the way face works are implemented by women on social media. The result indicated that women are indeed implementing face works on social media. Therefore, in terms of theoretical implication, this study underpinned the notion that face works are important forms of expressions on social media particularly for women who are experiencing personal conflicts. The research also suggests the importance in understanding various women's expressions that are commonly neglected due to the notion that the expressions are beyond the dominant male languages.

**Keywords:** Face Works, Women's Expressions, Social Media, Women Language

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## 1. Background

Instagram is a form of social media that has provided opportunities for many people to express and share ideas. Instagram users reached 400 million in the last three years up to 2015 [20]. In 2015, more than 50 million new users joined Instagram and Indonesia [17]. Data shows that 68 percent of Instagram users are women [19]. Instagram popularity has made some people become famous by having many followers on Instagram or commonly referred as Selebgram. Women's personal conflicts often turn into a public discourse when the women use social media as a means to explain their position. Personal conflicts on social media may also include face works or a threat to the "face" (personal image, self-esteem). Social media provides a platform for

various expressions relating to "face" (threats to face, face maintaining, face-saving, etc.) so that conflict becomes visible on social media.

This study argues that the theory of interpersonal communication particularly face work theory can be applied to the context of personal conflicts on Instagram. The interactive nature of the new media has encouraged women to express their desire more freely. In other words, the interactive nature of social media creates the opportunity for women to speak outside the boundary of masculine language. However, it is not easy to get out of masculine dominant discourse. Therefore, the question that emerges is whether the new media has the ability to generate face work expressions that are outside the dominance of masculine language. Thus, the primary objective of current research is to describe the use of "face work" in the context of women's personal conflicts on Instagram.

### 1.1. Theoretical Background

Over the past ten years, some researchers have conducted several studies on social media. Hu [7] conducted a research on image analysis of Instagram photos. Hu used computer vision techniques to study the contents of photos on Instagram. Hu's study identified different types of Instagram users. The results also indicated several categories of popular photos on Instagram. Hu's research is beneficial to this study because it showed how photographs were used to express personal images. Similar research also carried out by Zhao on the diversity of the "face" on Facebook. According to [21], the development of social media has made personal life become visible online. Zhao suggested three different strategies on how people organize their Facebook's experiences: impression management (performance), exhibiting long-term self-image, and depicting the important stages of their life. Zhao's research showed how social media accommodating a person life journey is including her or his experience of conflicts.

Zhao's research can be related to this research because it showed how social media could embody the expressions of personal and interpersonal communications. Another research in the similar area was conducted by Bakhsi, Shamma, and Gilbert [3], the research focused on how the face is used to draw attention so that the followers click the "like" button and give positive comments on Instagram. The study showed how uploaded photos have become an important communication tool in social media. The research also indicated that the appearance of faces in the uploaded photo affect the rating, production, and distribution of the photos. The results of the study showed that photos of the face have 38% the possibility to be liked, and 32% the possibility to attract comments. So, the study concluded that the face can be associated with the followers' reactions to the uploaded photos.

Based on previous studies, it can be seen that communication researches on social media have focused on the types of active users, types of popular photos, and expressions of personal identities. However, earlier studies do not cover how Instagram users express their "faces" (threats to face, face maintaining, face-saving, etc.). Hence, this study tries to fill the research gap by providing an explanation of interactive communications activities on Instagram through the analysis of face work.

Goffman [16] describes several types of face-work:

- a. Ritual: routine behaviors that are considered as a politeness and are expected to be done by all the people in everyday life (meetings, greetings, farewells, etc.).
- b. The corrective process: when a person causes an unpleasant condition to another person so that she or he must perform a corrective process as a way to an apology. The process also requires that the other person must accept the apology.
- c. The process of avoidance: if someone thinks that the other people will threaten her or his "face," she or he would avoid the source of the threat. Face maintaining is the reaction to facing threatening acts.

Bedijs and Held [4] argue that communication conflicts can be used to contextualize the implementation of Face Works theory. According to Bedijs and Held [4], the perception of reciprocity plays an important role in social media. Until now, the distinction between online and offline worlds are still frequently contested (virtual vs real). The distinction between the two cannot be justified because the online interaction is a part of daily realities of life. In other words, the users of social media are not a blank sheet but they bring their experiences, feelings, and self-identities on social media interactions. Although they can freely decide how they present themselves on social media, but the identities projected is not completely differ to their "real" social selves. Therefore, the notion of "face" and identity can be signified on social media. The signification of "face" on social media indicates the meaning of "face" in the context of offline communication. Positive appreciation or a threat to the "face" rise are similar reactions both in the contexts of online or offline communication.

## 2. Research Method

The study employs a critical constructionist paradigm of research. This study argues that the dominant power relations in society have distorted our perspectives on various issues in the community. The main data in this study were obtained from Instagram texts and literature reviews. The data analysis was conducted by using four elements of discourse analysis: character, fragmentation, focalization, and schemata [14]. According to Sara Mills [14], there are four elements of analysis that can be used to examine the expressions of women:

- a. Character / Role: analyzing stereotypes that often arises by the choice of language/sign used when describing the character or when women describing themselves.
- b. Fragmentation: analyzing language/sign that is used to describe the fragmentation of women's bodies.
- c. Focalization: the position in which women put themselves into and how they are to remain in the position they believe.
- d. Schemata: the social construction that distinguishes the perspective of women and men.

Saukko [18] suggests that the quality of a qualitative research that employs cultural studies' perspective can be examined through a contextual validity. It looks at the ability of the research in placing the phenomena being studied in broader social and political contexts. Thus, the contextual validity not only requires an understanding of the specific social context but also looks over the boarder social conditions in which the research conducted.

### 3. Finding and Discussion

The key feature of social media is self-presentation of the participants. Bedijs and Held [4] argue that social media users communicate their personal identities not only through the social media profile, but also by using any content that shared, any given comment, and their consumptions of other users' uploads material. Thus, if social media is a relatively free space for women to build and maintain their self-concept, the important question emerged is how effective social media can actually be used as a means to express the self-image of women? This research examines women's expressions on social media by using four analysis elements: characters, fragmentation, focalization, and schemata [14].

#### 3.1. Character and Fragmentation

The character/role element of analyses is used to examine women's stereotypes that are signified by the choice of language/words/signs. Women's face works on Instagram can be expressed through the depiction of the characters. Characters are usually indicated by the choice of words used, the kind of activities conducted, and the variety of attributes used. Characters also refer to the desired personal image of the Instagram account owner. In this study, women in conflict try to signify the "good women" characters through their uploaded photos/captions. This situation is in line with Irigaray's

arguments that states, women have always been in the position of domestication minority: cooking, knitting, embroidery, and sewing [8]. The women involved in personal conflicts usually attempt to encode that they are skilled in domestic works so that they are categorized as "ideal."

In addition to showing the domestic rituals, the women's also build their "ideal" faces through the depiction of their religious activities. They indirectly attack their opponent by stating that they surrender to God for helping them in facing all the threat they received from the other woman. Women tend to position themselves as the victim. They serve as either a victim of men seduction or a victim of infidelity.

In terms of fragmentation analysis, women in conflict tend to defend their "faces" by uploading photos that depict their bodies. The photos mainly focus on certain parts of the body such as face, body's curves, legs, and hip. In other words, the depiction of women's bodies closely related to women's acts in defending their faces.

Verbal language is the dominant language that has the logic of masculine domination. Many of women's bodily experiences are repressed due to the domination of male's perspectives in verbal language. The result of this study shows that the expressions of women's bodies are predominantly still using the dualism logic (old and young, thin-fat). The similar logic also signifies in the way women attack their opponent (women who are considered as competitors). It seems that social media has shown a shifting meaning in terms of "face" and sexual desire. Even though the woman's body is still continuously perceived as an object, either as a sacred thing in which the body should be covered (a marker of "good women") or women's body could be also signifying the notion "bad women" when wearing seductive clothes.

However, in the context of social media many women temp to show off their body particularly in defending their "attacked face". Even women who are considered "good" can be intrigued to open their bodies to rebuttal the competitor. The body is a form of communication for women. Therefore, how women are forced to show their bodies as a part of defending their faces signify the subordinate position of women in the community.

### 3.2. Focalization and Schemata

Focalization is the constructed position of women on social media texts. Predominantly, women are considered as sexually passive. This logic, in turn, makes some women who are sexually active tend to position themselves as the victim of male seduction or sex framed. Women in conflict usually try to convince the social media's audiences that the man in dispute is actually attracted/fell in love with them. Based on the analysis of focalization, it can be seen that women who are in conflict tend to label the opponent by using masculine's characteristic of "bad women" and usually both parties are still

wanting to continue the relationship with the man. Women in conflict usually attack each other in order to show that they deserve the disputed man.

Schemata on the other hand are the analysis that looks at the dominant social construction that distinguishes women and men perspectives. Schemata focus on the dominant gender constructions that are considered as normal or proper in the society. The dominant social discourse of gender is usually used to protect the "face". The discourse of marriage is the one important in the terms of women's dignity or face-honoring. Getting married is a relationship pattern that considers as important and respectable for women. Married, from the perspective of women is a mark that signifies an important legal bond of relationship. Many Indonesian women still believe that a sexual relationship must be leading to the man's responsibility in marrying the woman. In terms of personal conflict, the dominant marriage discourse can be used to attack the "face" of the opponent. Social media including Instagram gives the marginalized groups a chance to speak. However, this study shows that is not easy to get out of the mindset of dualism that predominantly has become a part of women's language habits.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research indicates that there are some major issues related to women's conflicts on social media such as social position, bodily expression, and the expression of desire. The results of this study show that face work which is originally an inter-personal communication concept turns out to be applicable in the context of social media communication. However, women's personal characters that appear in social media are still using the dualism masculine logic of "good women" and "bad women". Fragmentation of the female body can be seen clearly on Instagram uploads. The conflicting parties seek to build the "face" by attacking the "face" of others. Fragmentation is used by many women to attack the opponent's face. Fragmentation is applied by uploading photographs that show the fragmentation of women bodies particularly chest area, face, the curve of the waist, and also by capturing the body wearing clothes that frame the body tightly. Social media like Instagram could indeed provide an opportunity for women to speak out. However, this study shows that is not easy to get out of the dominant patriarchy mindset. Although social media provide an opportunity for women to speak more freely but it seems that many women are still using the logic of masculine language.

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