

#blessed and the fancy self: An Exploratory Study on the Different “Selves” Constructed in Facebook Posts

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Abstract

Social networking sites have become so popular that almost everyone is on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, or on all three. These sites have become an avenue for meeting new people and for reconnecting with old friends and long-lost relatives. Because of the public nature and the wide reach of these sites, online users feel the need to present themselves in a positive light and create a good impression on the other online participants. This kind of self-presentation can be observed through online interaction or in posts and status updates. This paper then explores the different ways of self-presentation made by Facebook users when they use *#blessed* in their posts. Through the hashtag, a self-image that is beyond the denotative meaning of the word *blessed* is constructed. It is hard to reconcile the religious association of the word *blessed* and the text (linguistic and visual) that shows how thankful they are for the luxury they enjoy. Using Goffman's theories on dramaturgy and impression management, this paper will analyze the captions that accompany the photos posted as textual evidence to see how the use of *#blessed* has become an accessory that is available to the self in his/her need and/or want to curate and engineer an ideal version of himself/herself.

Keywords: Social media, self-presentation, '#blessed', impression management, dramaturgy

Introduction

Creating a positive image (or the idea of it) has always been an ideal for most, if not all, people. Many of us want to position ourselves as the good cop, the protagonist, or the lucky person. This can be seen in the stories that we tell, the photos that we choose to put in our living rooms, or the kind of friends that we choose to go with. This want and/or need to create a positive image, usually a better version of one's self happens as we play a role in the "stage" called life.

Erving Goffman, in his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, claims that people have a clear understanding that first impressions are important, so each individual performs a role that is in accordance with social norms (5). He has likened this notion of self-presentation to a theater production, where participants have a role to play on stage and have to make sure that they perform well and project an image that will be desirable to the audience. Goffman's assumption is that "when an individual appears before others, he [or she] will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" (8). He further states that the moment an individual plays a part, he/she performs that part and asks the audience to "believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he [or she] possesses ..." (10). This "stage" is a metaphor for life, in which a person can choose what to show in the "front stage" and what to withhold in the "back stage": which stories to tell, which stories to withhold; how to dress up for a particular setting; how to control the voice and facial expressions to show politeness and tact. Because of this desire to be put in a good light, people tend to construct a version of themselves that, according to Goffman (qtd. in Hogan), is "idealized rather than authentic" (378).

The introduction of social media in the 2000s has reinforced and redefined the kind of self-presentation that Goffman has described in the 1960s. Social media, because of its "increased visibility and reach," allows anyone to create content that can be delivered simultaneously via a network of participants (Page et al. 5). Aside from its visibility and reach, Akbari notes that because of

its virtual nature, social media creates the illusion that one can have multiple selves and that there is no limit to the “multiplicity of spaces” that the selves can occupy (www.psychologytoday.com).

In social media sites such as LinkedIn, Orkut, MySpace, Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, participants have a chance to “inspect, edit, and revise” how they present themselves (Zarghooni 4). This has changed the dialogic interactions between the individuals and their assumed audience; unlike in Goffman’s stage and in face-to-face communication, social networking sites offer a more flexible dynamic between the individual and the audience. Although the 1990s, with the rise of emails, bulletin boards, and text messages as communicative channels, have already changed the communication landscape, they did not have a large-scale impact on the ways of self-presentation. Although these communicative channels were also interactive and conversational in nature, the kind of interactions and self-presentations were more or less the same as the dynamics of face-to-face communication. These channels are also more similar to traditional mass media, in which the communication is from one channel to many broadcasting channels (Page et al. 6–7).

In the Philippines, the introduction of Friendster in 2002, marked the start of social media visibility. Although there were other networking sites that came before it such as Classmates.com, SixDegrees.com, etc., Friendster was the first networking site that made most Filipinos “go online” and create virtual connections. It was followed by other social networking sites such as LinkedIn and MySpace in 2003, Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and Instagram in 2010 (Digital Trends). In recent years, these social networking sites have become so popular in the country that almost everyone is on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, or on all three.

The 2015 WeAreSocial.sg Data survey showed that Internet penetration in the Philippines was up from 36% to 44% and social media penetration was up from 32% to 40%. The survey also showed that the Top 3 social media of choice by Filipinos remains the same: Facebook, Twitter, Google+ (Castro).

Self-Presentation and Social Media

These social media sites have become an avenue for meeting new people and for reconnecting with old friends and long-lost relatives. The “search for people you may know” and the “chat room” features have enticed users to actively participate in the conversations that happen in the site, so much so that nowadays these sites have extended their scope to function as a public “online diary” for most users. As online users realize that the online world, despite its wide reach, is getting smaller, they also seem to realize that it becomes more competitive; thus the pressure to present a “better” version of themselves also becomes higher. As Giddens (qtd. in Mautner) puts it, “a self-identity has to be created and more or less reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions” (186).

Because of the changing dynamics of online self-presentation, different social media trends have surfaced, one of which is the use of #blessed. Sarah Bennett, in her article “They Feel ‘Blessed’” describes how #blessed is used in social media:

Here are a few of the ways that God has touched my social network over the past few months:

- S(he) helped a friend get accepted into graduate school. (She was “blessed” to be there.)
- S(he) made it possible for a yoga instructor’s Caribbean spa retreat. (“Blessed to be teaching in paradise,” she wrote.)
- S(he) helped a new mom outfit her infant in a tiny designer frock. (“A year of patiently waiting and it finally fits! Feeling blessed.”)
- God has, in fact, recently blessed my network with dazzling job promotions, coveted speaking gigs, the most wonderful fiancés ever, front row seats at Fashion Week, and nominations for many a “30 under 30” list (The New York Times).

There is something peculiar in the association of #blessed to the status update that it accompanies. It seems difficult to reconcile the religious association of the word blessed and the textual evidence that can be seen in social media posts. Based on the impression given off by these posts, there seems to be a self that is re/presented in the posts that is beyond the denotative meaning of the word.

The word “blessed,” in its denotative sense, is a verb that means “to ask God to protect somebody/something holy by saying a prayer over it,” or an adjective that means “holy, lucky, and enjoyable in a way that gives you a sense of peace or a feeling of freedom” (Hornby 144). In a sermon delivered by Carla Pratt Keyes, she explains being blessed through a quote from Proverbs: “We are God’s creation. We are creatures whose very existence proceeds from God’s intention. We are blessed because God made us and God cares that we exist and God has hopes and dreams for us” (www.ginterparkpc.org). Meanwhile, French and French cite Matthew’s gospel and highlight humility and sacrifice: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the Earth ...” (www.patheos.com).

In social media, however, the word “blessed,” because of the coinage of #blessed, has developed different connotative meanings. #blessed is a hashtag used “to express gratitude for fortunate circumstances in life.” Its exact origin is unknown but sources point to 2011 when the music blog, Pigeons and Planes, featured a documentary about Lil B the rapper, and used #blessed in expressing gratitude for the rapper’s work (#Blessed: A Series on Hashtag). Meanwhile, hashtag, a term chosen by the American Dialect Society as Word of the Year in 2012, originally functioned as a marker to group ideas and to structure communication to “allow writers to operate in multiple registers at once, in a compressed space” (Waldman).

As mentioned earlier, #blessed is used to express gratitude; at present, however, it seems that the hashtag is used not just to show pure gratitude, but, in a way, implies that whatever blessing received was deserved by the person who posted it (French and French). It has gained different connotations,

including gratitude, pride, humble bragging/showing off, that have gone beyond the denotative meaning of the word. According to Waldman, it seems that hashtags have become scare quotes that tell the reader to pay attention because there is more to the enclosed text than meets the eye. It has been also used ironically by those who perceive the hashtag as being too self-gratuitous.

It can be argued that there is nothing problematic in the use of #blessed; in fact it can be explained using Goffman's theories on dramaturgy and impression management. As mentioned in the earlier part of the paper, Goffman assumes that individuals have different motives when dealing with other people in different situations and that they will perform a role in order to manage the impression of other people. He believes that these individuals act in order to make a show and not just information. In a given stage, what happens in the back stage and the front stage are controlled. The back stage refers to behavior which is relatively uninhibited due to the lack of an audience to impress, whereas the front stage refers to instances of interaction with others in which the individuals attempt to impart a specific impression of themselves. This varies depending on the setting and the context, specifically the social situation which dictates the flow of the interaction (Goffman, "The Presentation ..."). This kind of performance is carried on from "dramatization to idealization, in which the individual presents himself [herself] before others and incorporates and exemplifies the officially accredited values of the society more so, in fact, than does his behavior, as whole" (33). Hogan interprets this kind of theatricality as not based on mere displays of feelings or fake exhibitions of spontaneity, but the need for an individual to present an "idealized" rather than authentic version of himself/herself. He concurs with Goffman that this dramaturgical approach sees life as a stage in which individuals engage in performances. These performances are the "activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his/her continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers". This continued presence allows individuals to tweak their behavior and selectively give off details, a process he termed as 'impression management' (Hogan 378-380). If an individual, then, is to express and adhere to ideal standards during his/

her performance, then he/she will have to forgo or conceal certain actions which are inconsistent with these standards (Goffman 26). And so, as part of the performance, performers may downplay activities or conceal facts/motives that may not be aligned with the idealized version of himself/herself.

Social media then can be another “stage” for a theatrical performance; it is another platform where the online self as the performer chooses what to reveal in the post (front stage) and what to withhold in the backstage. In the theater and in face-face communication, however, the audience cannot see what is happening in the backstage. This is not the case with social media and #blessed; the backstage is not withheld from the audience, rather it is as if #blessed has become an accessory that is available to the self in his/her need to present an ideal version of the self. That is what this paper aims to do – to explore the different ways in which online users use #blessed to curate a better version of themselves through the expressions given (visual and textual) and the impressions given off when they post something using #blessed.

Methodology

Data collection. In order to explore how some people manage the front and back stages on social media through the expressions given and the impressions given off when they post something using #blessed, this paper analyzed ten Facebook posts. Data collection was from October to November 2015. The tag #blessed was used to surface the top posts that use #blessed. The first ten posts were then selected; the assumption here being these posts were the most recent posts when the data gathering happened. All posts were chosen at random without considering the identity of the user. The posts used in this study are all public posts that are available to all social media users on Facebook, thus not violating the rights to privacy and security of the users. However, studies on data privacy and ethical access to materials to be used for research have noted that policies are not consistent regarding the users’ right to privacy. In the case of Facebook, it offers the online users privacy

options: public, semi-public, and private, and so it is understood that when a post is public, it is open to all members of Facebook (Page et al. 65). However, even if the posts are public and the online users are aware that everyone may have access to their posts, some might object to the reuse of the material (Marwick qtd. in Page et al. 67). Hence, as part of the ethical responsibility of the researcher, the actual posts will not be included in the paper and the identities of the users will not be disclosed. Any reference used that might give away the identity of the user was also removed.

After the posts were downloaded, each post was analyzed in terms of their linguistic and visual content (if a photo was made available) since the hashtag #blessed also pertains to the photo that accompanies the post. Analysis was done by describing the photo, identifying the expressions given through the caption, then inferring the impression given off through anomalous word choice and hashtags. After describing the textual evidence, the posts were then categorized based on the patterns and themes that emerged.

Framework for analysis. The patterns will be explained using Goffman's theory on dramaturgy and impression management. For Goffman, the dramaturgical discipline works like a social establishment, that is, "any places surrounded by fixed barriers to perceptions in which a particular kind of activity takes place, and this can be studied from the point of view of impression management (152). There are three main participants in this social establishment: the animator, the "sounding box" who produces or gives voice to the message that is being conveyed; the author, who is responsible for the selection of words and sentiments that are being expressed; and the principal, the person or institution, whose position or beliefs are being represented and is held responsible for whatever is being presented (qtd. in Duranti 294–295). In a network, what participants often undertake is "not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience".

There is a more profound parallel between stage and conversation. One such theater is social media. In this theater, all participants do not just play a role; they become and are treated as the characters they play. The self here is

seen as author who produces the message and, through the use of linguistic choices available to him/her, decides what information to reveal and what to withhold. Facebook acts as the animator; it serves as the channel for the posts and provides the context as to how the self will be presented. The principal is the context, i.e., societal constructs and societal conventions that the self takes into consideration when an individual constructs or presents a self on Facebook. This self is presumed to have two or more identities and can choose which identity will be played out on the front stage (Facebook post) and which will remain on the back stage.

The diagram below explains the conceptual framework of this paper. The self, as the author, is at the center controlling the front stage and the back stage. The main participants surround the self and influence the message that the self will create. Lastly, audience is added as part of the participants because it is a major influence to the self-presentation decisions of the self.

Results and Discussion

Data presentation

Description of the photos	Expressions given (caption)	Other Hashtags Used	Impressions that the post gives off
1) The photo shows the person who posted posing with a famous actress against a backdrop of the set of the taping. Both are smiling and are directly looking at the camera.	Finished 24 hours of taping/ BTS for [name of show]. Role as brother of [famous actress]. I'm so Thankful to be Part of it.	#Taping #BTS #24hours #[name of show] #NewFriends #[name of famous actress] #blessed	Tired but fulfilled and grateful; Proud to be working with a famous actress in a big network; Showing proof to validate the caption (posing with the actress during taping)

Description of the photos	Expressions given (caption)	Other Hashtags Used	Impressions that the post gives off
2) The photo shows a document labelled "Status Change," which contains details of job regularization. All details – designation, job description, effectivity of the regulation – are in the photo.	Woah! Thank you Lord for this Blessing! After 6 months sa work, I am now a regular employee of [name of a big electronics company]. Wow Fantastic Baby	#Blessed #Thankful #Grateful #HappyKiddo #HappyMe	Grateful; Proud; Overwhelmed
3) The photo shows a receipt from ML Kwarta Padala as proof of payment of a client. The entire document is posted but sensitive details such as name, address, and contact number are blurred or covered with emojis.	Another day of blessing and client. "Proof of Payment from a Client in Davao City" Legit and Trusted Seller here! [name of product] are always available on hand. PM me for orders or call/Message [cell phone number]	#blessed #legit #ThankYou #yes	Grateful; Showing proof to establish credibility as a legitimate online seller; Advertising the products sold
4) The photo shows the person with the actress– directly facing the camera, all smiles, and half-embracing each other.	Reunited with Philippine Pride and multi-awarded international actress, [name of the actress] in New York! Thank you for the laughter my dear, to be continued in Vegas!	#crazy#friends #reunited#newyork #blessed#bestactress #film#icon	Proud to be rubbing elbows with someone he/ she considers an example of "Philippine pride;"
5) The fifth post does not have a photo; it is just a post with a tag "travelling to..."	[name] travelling to Los Angeles, California from Philippine Airlines-NAIA with [name of the partner] May God bless our first family trip.	#teamFernandez #LA #blessed	Grateful; Proud to be travelling to the US; Could be bragging given the details of the destination

Description of the photos	Expressions given (caption)	Other Hashtags Used	Impressions that the post gives off
6) The photo shows a plate with one cup of rice, a piece of hash brown, a hotdog, and three strips of bacon.	Breakfast with beautiful people.	#blessed #grateful #breakfast #americanslam #biggsdiner #food #foodie #foodpic #foodstagram #foodporn #foodgasm #instafood #instagood #picoftheday	Grateful for the company of beautiful people; Riding on the celebrity trend of using too many hashtags
7) The photo is most probably set in a tapsilogan place. There is a white Monobloc table – on it are a plate of tocilog and a plate of hotsilog, two cups of iced tea, a cup of coffee, and bottles for condiments. Along with the food are a car key placed at the center, in between the two plates; two wallets; a cell phone two; and a pouch for shades.	Coz we are nocturnal creatures, just got home from my “mornight” date with the master chef [name of the sister]! She picked me up from work, then we had a sumptuous meal, &a good massage afterwards – yes my late birthday treat for her! Thank you, Lord, for your continuous provisions! Will be shutting these eyes in a little while! Hello, rest day Thursday!	#blessed	Showing off what they have and what they can afford to have
8) The photo highlights the location – the shoreline and mountain view of a beach in Anilao, a well-known diving area in the Philippines. At the rightmost corner of the photo, stands a woman in diving gear and carrying a camera.	Great day great viz for diving	#anilao #brightsun #sunny #photographer #amateur #clearsky, #clear #philippines #diving #scuba #critters #diver #hunter #divergoal #goodviz #blueskies #holiday #vacation #anilaophotohotel #anilaobackpackers #ilovemylife #blessed #kisses #surfaceinterval #dive	Grateful for the privilege to afford a luxury that is diving; Trying to cushion the brag by using #amateur; Use of #ilovemylife may be a sign of showing off

Description of the photos	Expressions given (caption)	Other Hashtags Used	Impressions that the post gives off
9) The photo shows the phone being held by a hand with manicured nails. The box of the phone is also placed beside the phone.	So if you guys didn't know I left my iPhone 6 in the Philippines and my sister sent it from Germany and they are saying it'll take 45 days to get here. But my husband loves me sooooo much he bought me an iPhone 6s. #blessed to the fullest #besthusbandintheworld I love you baby!	#blessed #besthusbandintheworld	Showing off the things that she has; Proud that the husband pampers her
10) The photo shows a woman in her bath robe sitting on a large bed in a nice hotel while taking a selfie.	Good morning Malaysia! Last day! Can't wait to go back home!	#wokeuplikethis #asianhottie #asiangirl, #natural #pinay, #filipina #curvy #thickwoman #cozican #blessed #thankful #thisisme #goinghome #excited #kualalumpur #malaysia #philippines #kapampangan #proud	Bragging; Showing off not just the material things that she has but her physical appearance, as well

It can be gleaned from the data in the table above that the authors (the self who creates the post) have different ways of showing how they are blessed. In the first three posts, being blessed is equated to a successful career – showbiz projects, business opportunities, and tenure at work. The next four posts equate being blessed to successful interpersonal relationships – forging friendships, spending quality time with family or with people that the self considers special. The last three photos consider luxury as a blessing – travel, expensive hobbies, vacation, and fancy gadget.

There is no question that the expression of gratitude is evident in the ten posts that were analyzed. However, the addition of #blessed and other hashtags in the post makes the intention of the self questionable to the audience. Examining the lexical choices in the caption and in the other hashtags would make the audience see how the author constructs different images of the self and would probably lead them to doubt the presence of the “grateful self.”

In the first post, for example, what can be interpreted, at first, as a complaint from someone who had a really long day turns out to be the self's show of gratitude for the work that he/she has, especially that working in the showbusiness is a dream for a lot of Filipinos. The use of other hashtags together with #blessed and the emphasis on the words, Thankful and Part, gives off the impression that the self is grateful and proud. A new hashtag that would capture the impression given by the self in the post is #tooblessedtoobestressed. Like the first post, the second looks at work (specifically tenure at work) as a blessing. The expression of extreme joy ("Woah"), the emphasis on the words "Lord" and "Blessing," as well as the hashtags used show the overwhelming joy of the self. The next sentence reveals the reason for the self's show of gratitude—being regularized, after six months on probation, with a multinational company that manufactures transistors, monolithic ICs, and microchips. In the Philippine context, new employees are placed on a six-month probation, after which they are regularized or asked to resign. Given this context, one can understand where the grateful self is coming from. The questionable intention of the self, however, may come from the fact he/she had to post a photo of the document that mentions the name of the company and his/her career's "status change". The third post slightly differs from the first two; it seems that the self is not only grateful for a blessing but also wants to position herself/himself as a legitimate online seller. Credibility is important, in the context of e-business especially where online theft and fraud cases can happen.

In the fourth post, #blessed in this photo is primarily associated with friendship, which is a valid reason for being blessed; but one can also question the other layers of intention of the self, especially because of the other hashtags used and the emphasis on words like pride, multi-awarded. While the self is showing gratitude, he or she may be showing off the fact that he/she is rubbing elbows with a celebrity. The fifth post is different from the other posts because this is the only one in the sample that does not have an accompanying photo; the self "checked in" at Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) and indicated

that he/she is “travelling to Los Angeles, California” and wrote a caption that asks God to bless their first family trip. The words “bless” and “blessed” may have different meanings in the post; the former is an act of prayer, the latter acknowledging the blessing that was given to the family. The photo in the sixth post is different from the other posts because of the short caption which is not directly related to the photo; even more interesting is the use of a lot of hashtags. The self here could be following a trend in social media by using a lot of hashtags so that more participants in the online network can see the post when they search for the hashtags present in the post. The seventh post seems to be a blatant display of bragging of what the self has. The strategic positions of the car keys, the wallets and the mobile phones, as well as the elaborate caption (carefully chosen words to create an image of a “good” life like master chef, sumptuous meal, good massage) would make the audience question whether the self is grateful for God’s provisions or plainly showing off.

The eighth post starts with an acknowledgement that it is a “great day and great viz (visibility) for diving. It can be seen in the photo that the focus of the post is not the self but the location because the image occupies most of the space in the photo and the self is placed somewhere in the corner. #blessed is also accompanied by other hashtags that may lead the audience to interpret that the self as blessed because he/she can afford expensive hobbies like diving and photography. In the ninth post, the juxtaposition of #blessed, #besthusbandever, and iPhone 6seems to tell the audience two things: the self thinks that the partner looks after his/her needs or that the self is trying to create the idea that the partner is “rich” and he/she is blessed to have him/her. It is possible that the self equates the “love” of the partner to material things. The tenth is similar to the ninth post. The hashtags as well as the photo show that being blessed is equated to having material things—enjoying the luxury of travel and a nice hotel. The photo also highlights physical appearance (#wokeuplikethis) and exudes a sensual undertone (#asianhottie, #curvy). This kind of image is in contrast to the idea of being modest and grateful for the blessings received. Thus, the self is most probably showing off.

Conclusion

Based on the small sample posts analyzed in this paper, #blessed seems to present these different images of the self: (1) #blessed as a symbol of false modesty, as seen in the first three posts; (2) #blessed as a status symbol, as seen in photos four to seven; and (3) #blessed as a symbol of privilege and/or social distance (having something that others may not have), as seen in the last three posts. Whether deliberate or not, it seems that when people post online, they tend to think not only of themselves but of an audience that can see their post and so they try to curate the post according to how they perceive the audience to react. The drama of the idealized self observed by Goffman is employed.

It can also be argued that in all three categories, there seems to be a tension between the self's sincere show of gratitude and his/her feeling of pride for achieving or acquiring something. If one examines the captions in the ten posts, there is nothing wrong with them in general; however, the addition of the #blessed tends to complicate the intention of the self. Although, this paper, given the small sample used for analysis, cannot really account for the actual intention of the self, the lexical choices in the caption and in the other hashtags give off the impression that the self is proud of what he/she has but does not want people to think that he/she is showing off. In this sense, the word "blessed" has now acquired different layers of meaning and has become a "loaded term [that] blurs the distinction between two different categories: gift and reward. It can be a term of pure gratitude, but it can also imply that it was deserved" (French and French).

If in Goffman's impression management, the backstage could be a conflict between the theater actors that has to be left behind before an actor goes to the front stage, on Facebook, #blessed acts as the back stage that tries to mitigate the brag. By invoking a word that is associated with religion, the self probably thinks that he/she can still present an ideal version of the self. Santos offers one possible explanation for this; she says that in the Philippine context, the measure of success is not productivity and ability but fate. Filipinos put

everything to fate: either you are lucky or you are not. Santos claims that in almost all communities in the country, the idea of “gulong ng palad” is deemed pivotal. She also said that 70% of the Filipino population believes that poverty and suffering are the will of God and is in part preparation for the reward that awaits in the after-life (5).

Although Santos’s explanation cannot be solely relied on, her notion also shares Goffman’s claim that the individuals present themselves by incorporating and exemplifying the “officially accredited values of the society.” Since bragging and showing off are not ideal traits for the self to possess, the self has to find ways to mitigate the brag and #blessed has become the accessory that is available to the self in his/her need and/or want to curate and engineer an ideal version of himself/herself.

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