

***How Woman Presents Herself Online : Exploring The Practice of Personal Identity  
Through Brand of Member of Female Daily Forums***

Fatma Dian Pratiwi, Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia

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**Abstract**

This paper consider the role of brand as a media to present a woman in a virtual community in Indonesia called Female Daily Forums. In the absence of face to face communication, the member need something to identify to as they communicate to one another. Specifically, the research looks at how certain brand is related to the daily production of member's identity. In order to seek answer for the research question, this study employed netnographic-like observation of the participant when they communicate in the forum. I analyze this problem by using the theory of Irving Goffman onimpression management. Later on, this theory developed by Andrew Wood and Matthew Smith into virtual context that discuss how this identity applied on the internet. Wood and Smith said that identity is "a complex personal social construct, consisting in part of who we think ourselves to be, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually perceive us." The finding of the research shows that the member Female Daily Forums use brand as positive self presentation. Through her possession of information about certain brand, she become the opinion leader and she is known as the master of the brand. In this social media context, in which participants in this research produce branded content, therefore, shape their identity as well. They become the source of information about certain brand for example @Bluepanda for the brand Sulwashoo and The History of Whoo, and @Lizvan for the brand SK II, while they are not the official representative of the company which own the brand.

Keyword: Virtual Community, Women, Personal Identity, Brand

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## Introduction

The relation between women with technology have experienced promising developments. As the statement stated by Wilska (2003: 442) that, "*the differences between genders in the use of new technology are often reported to decrease, since women and girls spend as much time on ICT as men and boys do*". This can be seen from the internet use by women in their daily lives. So it is common to find women who actively use their smartphones or laptops to support their needs, especially relating and searching for information on social media. The survey results conducted by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) on internet user data in Indonesia in 2016, recorded that there were 132.7 million users. While in 2017 it increased to 143.26 million; consisting of 51.8 percent of male users and 48.2 percent of female users. ([www.goukm.id](http://www.goukm.id)). It can be seen that the difference in number between male and female users is not very significant. One of the women activities on the Internet through digital media is to join a virtual community of Female Daily Forums. A community that is present as part of the website Female Daily.com (hereinafter Female Daily) is also the largest online review site in Indonesia. Most of its members, even claimed up to 99% are women who are fully aware of technology and have the pleasure of sharing information with other fellow members. (Anonymous, Success Stories of Hanifa Ambadar and Afif Siregar Bringing Female Daily into the Largest Women's Forum in Indonesia, 2016).

Female Daily is a start up company (a company that appears in the digital economy era) that focuses on providing information about beauty to women. There are many startups like Female Daily that also provide information that focuses on women, for example *Wolipop*, *Fimela* dan *Vemale*. In fact, only Female Daily specializes in providing beauty information and the only start up that has a community. The Female Daily community is a gathering place for Indonesian women in the virtual space and is one of the pioneers who has survived to this day.

Here the existence of the community becomes part of the business strategy that is owned by the inventor and CEO (Chief of Corporation), Female Daily, Hanifa Ambaddare. According to him, doing networking and adding connections is an added value of a social media business. As stated by Seth Godin, a writer, entrepreneur and marketer, "You can use social media to turn strangers into friends, friends to become customers, and customers become sellers." (<https://digitalmarketer.id>).

The Female Daily Forums virtual community allows its members to actualize themselves, especially in the online world. It is interesting to then look at, that on one hand women enter conditions when they have the opportunity to construct new meanings in building relationships with technology. As said by Donna Saraway, that "*technology can empower women, or at least allow of gender transformation* (Haraway in Ganito, 20012 :80).



**Figure 1.**  
**The example of Comment of Female Daily Member for a brand**  
 Source: *Female Daily.com*

In this condition the female members of the Female Daily Forums virtual community are categorized as commodities that are actively involved, not only as users but also producers. There is UGC (user generated content - ie all types of user-created content that is publicly published in a system (<https://id.techinasia.com>)). This is if associated with the fact that in the past content was produced by companies or agencies. However, as the development of technology becomes more sophisticated and inexpensive, anyone can create a content themselves and spread it. Besides UGC, there are users who tie themselves into creative activities, communication, community building activities and content production (Fuchs, 2009: 82). However, their situation as prosumer does not then mark the process of democratizing the media towards a participatory system, but becomes a commodification of total human creativity. So that visions of the theorists such as Benjamin, Brecht and Enzenberger about the structure of the emancipatory media are now classified in capital (Ibid).

In this context, companies begin to pay attention to virtual communities and begin to integrate them into their communication strategies. Big names in the beauty industry such as Hada Labo (a Japanese brand), feel the need to listen to suggestions from Female Daily before opening their branches in Indonesia. The reason is, many companies believe that consumers who join a particular community become more involved with their products.

The implication is that Female Daily is often contacted by cosmetics and beauty companies from abroad before the brand is present in Indonesia. Based on the statement from Hanifa, the cosmetics companies often contact Female Daily to discuss before deciding whether to enter the Indonesian market (<https://dailysocial.id/post/hanifa-ambaddar-ceo-female-daily-network-bicara-tentang-membangun-komunitas/>). This is because in the Female Daily community forum, talks, discussions and even reviews of their products have been started since they were first introduced in the world, long before they were considered to be present in Indonesia. *“This community is so advanced, even brands that are not here yet have indeed been used. So when a new brand wants to enter here they will meet Female*

*Daily first,*”( <https://dailysocial.id/post/hanifa-ambaddar-ceo-female-daily-network-bicara-tentang-membangun-komunitas/>). One of the examples is the beauty brand of Hada Labo, which had just entered Indonesia in 2013, but in the Female Daily forum it had been a topic of warm conversation since three years before (2010). The experience of the Hada Labo brand is a repetition of the history of BB cream beauty products in the Female Daily community. BB Cream's beauty products, which have been the prima donna since 2011, has been into the conversation of the the Female Daily community since four years before, or around 2007.

On-line conversation dynamics in the form of writing, in the form of sharing experiences and then giving a review for a brand are the activities of female members of the Female Daily virtual community. They seem to get space to express themselves, through the interaction of sharing information on beauty. In there, some members have more knowledge about a brand than other members. One will be the party to answer any problems raised by other members, as in the thread brand Sulwhasoo, a beauty product brand from South Korea. One member who has the competence to answer all questions related to this brand is account with the name @bluepanda. That account is not an official representation of the Amorea Pacific company, as the company that issued the brand, nor is a public figure who has high influence. Even so, that account is the one with knowledge - in this case regarding Sulwashoo brand – who is bigger than the others. In Female Daily Forums, such account are often called by *suhu*.

These *suhu* become entities that act as a kind of opinion leader, who has the authority to lead the opinions of others to accept or reject an innovation. Innovation in this context are beauty products and brands used by *suhu* . Usually they already have experience in using products with that particular brand, then write down their experiences in the forum. Forum members then respond to this issue with various comments and usually in a positive context. This is related to the conversation rules that have been mentioned in the forum rules.

Along the way, the members of the forum recognized the identity of *suhu* through mastering the information of a brand they have. This is important, considering that in a virtual community, the identity of its members cannot be clearly identified. As in the real world, identity plays a key role in virtual communities. Moreover, in the process of communication, both real and virtual, knowing the identity of the communicant by the communicator, is the main activity. The aim is to create understanding and evaluate interactions over the years. The problem is, in virtual communities, identity becomes unclear. The reason is because the basic instructions on personality and social roles that can be seen in the real world are not present in the virtual community. According to Slater (1998), questions about identity in virtual space become plural, since in text-based mode of communication, the participants have reflexivity and choice in terms of self-presentation.

For this reason, in this context Female Daily Forums became a tool by which members added value to their identity and social relations through the practice of production and sharing cultural and affective content. Or in other words through the

practice of social labor, prosumer (people who carry out prosumption) can choose the way they shape identity (Anderson et al. (2016: 3).

Therefore, members of the Female Daily forum, especially those *suhu* become active entities and are bound to market experience and brand communication. Cova and Dalli (2009) call it a new consumer or in the language of Hardt and Negri they are immaterial workers who produce relations, communication and knowledge which then become instruments appropriated by capital for economic interests (in Fuchs, 188). In this way, it can be assumed that web users become workers whose energy is monetized by online capitalist forces while being paid workers, when they produce immaterial content, and at that time also become consumers for the same content. This assumption is in line with the opinion of Terranova (2009), that free labour on the internet work voluntarily and unpaid, enjoy and exploit at the same time including members of virtual communities that produce value.

For this reason, this research will focus on user generated content (UGC) or content generated by users in this case the *suhu* in the Female Daily virtual community, as a form of social labor connected with personal identity, that includes opinions, comments, reviews, discussions and pictures posted, and how this personal identity is produced in relation to a particular brand. Furthermore, researcher sought to understand the role played by prosumer in the struggle of *suhu* to express and shape identity when they produce UGC on the Internet.

Furthermore, this study will look at some of the practices of *suhu* in the Female Daily Forums as immaterial and social workers, by looking specifically at how they interact and choosing to participate in producing personal identities in the content, especially when identity has a flexible, fluid and complex nature. So that the formation of identity can be understood as a constant process, but vulnerable to multi-faceted heterogeneity and the speed of contemporary life and consumerism (Schectman et al., 2013).

If it is associated with the existence of a brand, the members of the Female Daily Forums virtual community as consumers, always strive to adjust to the image created by the brand. In addition, in order to benefit from and contribute to the growth of identity, brands begin to allow their consumers to participate strongly in activities for recognition, interaction, identification and consumption (Lury, 2009).

So this research focuses on the perspectives of the *suhu* in Female Daily Forums to see the interpretations of the practices of their social workers, by studying and comparing the experiences of these individuals in how they identify themselves in the process of *prosumption*. Furthermore, the focus of research is on the practice of online *prosumption* of *suhu* of Female Daily Forums, when interacting with certain brands. The desire to associate themselves with these brands encourages the *suhu* to interact in "immaterial" and "social" labor practices that benefit both prosumer and brand.

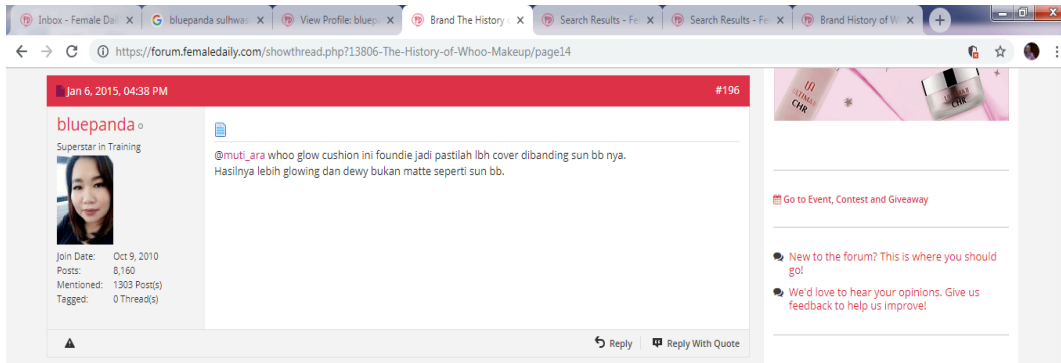
## **Goffman's Theory on Online Communication**

Goffman's impression management theory has become the heart of academic work that seeks to examine online communication and the use of social media (Schoeder, 2001, Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). While, Ralph Schroeder (2002) described "virtual environments" as computer shows that allow or force users (or users) to have feelings present in an environment other than who they really are and to interact with the environment (Schroeder, 1996: 25), Bullingham and Vasconcelos, find that Goffman's original framework is of great usefulness as an explanatory framework for understanding identity through interaction and the presentation of self in the online world (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013).

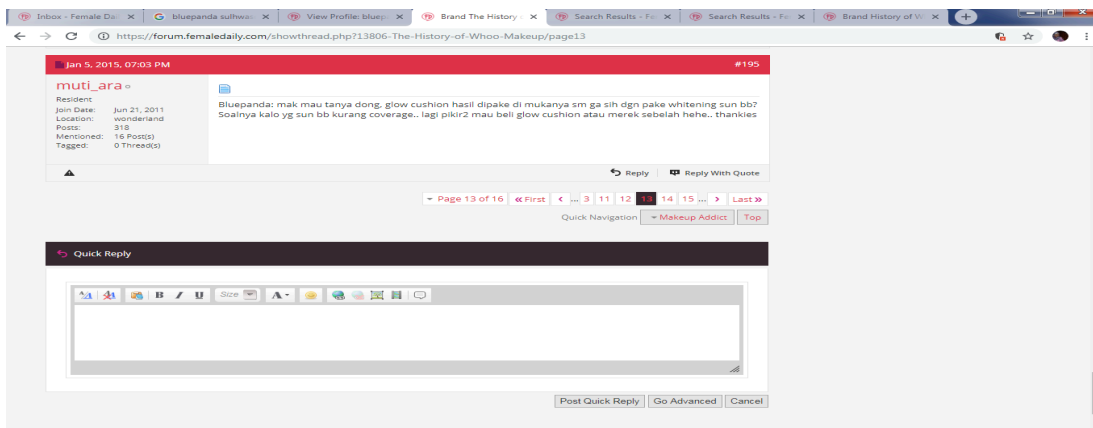
In the context of the virtual world, Goffman's theory of self-presentation was developed by Andrew Wood and Matthew Smith who also discussed how that identity applies on the internet. Wood and Smith said that identity is "*a complex personal and social construct, consisting in part of who we think ourselves to be, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually perceive us*" (Wood and Smith, 2005 : 52).

Furthermore, self-performance is an individual's attempt to construct oneself- in an online context through photos or writing so that the social environment is willing to accept the existence and have the same perception with that individual as well as the informants in this research. They are @Bluepanda, @Lizvan and @Snowyland accounts. These three accounts together function as a kind of information source for other members of the Female Daily Forums virtual community, especially for skincare items. Bluepanda is a *suhu* (master) for two brands of Sulwashoo and The History of Whoo. Both are high-end skincare brands from South Korea.

The @Bluepanda account has been a member of Female Daily Forums since 2010 and has posted as many as 8,160 posts and has been mentioned in the forum for 1303 posts. This information can be obtained when a member views a Bluepanda's complete account profile with her profile photo. The name @Bluepanda in the real world is Caroline, a career woman who lives in South Jakarta. Caroline chose to use an pseudonym only because she saw other members of the forum also use an pseudonym, "because seeing the others mostly using their names, so I followed it" (@Bluepanda). In addition, the @Bluepanda account is the only account that she has in Female Daily Forums.



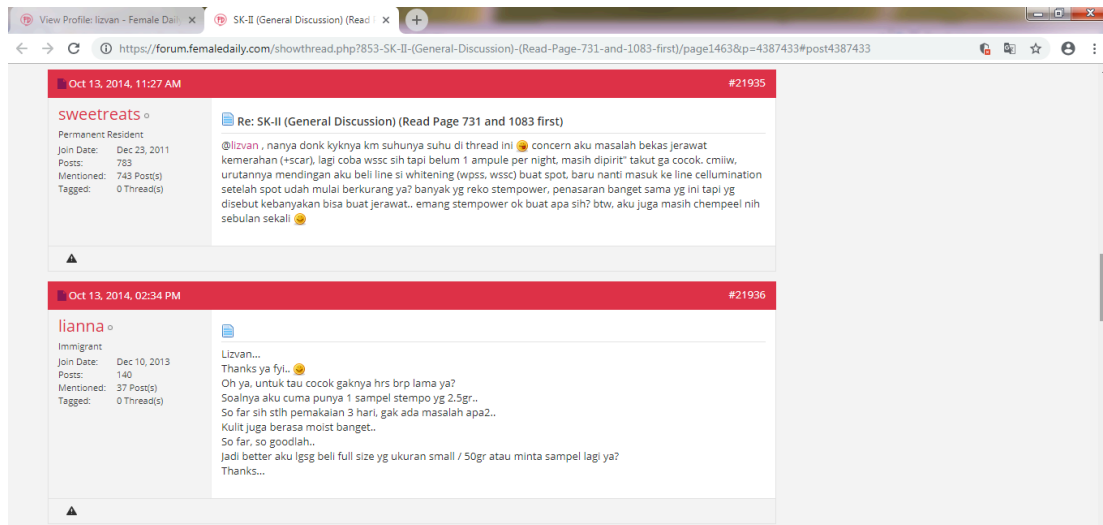
**Figure 2.**  
**The @Bluepanda account answers forum member questions**



**Figure 3.**  
**A member's question is addressed to @Bluepanda**

@Bluepanda include members who are active in the forum. For 3-4 times a week, she is active especially when going to buy a product, so she will read reviews from other members. The two forums, especially the Sulwhasoo brand and History of Whoo, are forums that she often visits.

While the @Lizvan account, it is known as "suhu" for the SK II skincare forum, a top class brand from Japan.



**Figure 4**

**A conversation between @Ririsrici's account and @Lizvan about SK II brand review**

Source: Female Daily Forums

@Bluepanda became the member of the forum that has more extensive and in-depth information about the Sulwashoo brand, The History of Whoo. They identified themselves with these brands even though at first their intention was only to share information and review their experiences when using the brand.

I also don't understand how, even wonder why I was called "suhu". Maybe it's because I post a lot about Sulwasoo and History of Whoo and often answer other members' questions. There is no intention to be a *suhu*, actually just sharing experience (@Bluepanda).

Many forum members finally rely on the reviews and choices of *suhu* before they decide to buy a product with a certain brand. Even many of those who make personal contacts at @Bluepanda and @Lizvan directly, not through forums. This is because they want to ask everything about the Sulwasoo brand and The History of Whoo and SKII in more depth.

Since I was called *suhu* by the other members, so many "consulted" through the private message line, even earlier I was mistaken for BA (beauty assistant) of Sulwasoo/History of Whoo heheheeee. Due to a lot of people are consulting, I often read a lot about these brands, so I don't get the wrong information (@Bluepanda).

Here, virtual communities act as a kind of media social that proposes novel opportunities for sharing self-presentational content, which might sometimes be described as "branding" oneself online by becoming a "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2013). The "micro-celebrity" concept was defined as "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (Senft, 2013).



One thing that becomes a major difference between @Bluepanda and @Lizvan is that if @Bluepanda did her activities in Female Daily Forums solely because of the desire to share and to add relationships and insights. In addition to the above reasons, Lizvan also uses this forum for her online buying and selling of beauty products. When Lizvan became *suhu* for the SKII brand, that's when she had the credibility to not only review and advise which products were suitable for user use, but even she also provided the products needed. The brand that was sold by Lizvan was not only limited to SKII but also other Asian brands.

Goffman's work adopted the metaphor of "stage" to show the dissimilarity between the situations of self-presentation struggle seen in other different situations. Goffman (1956) explained that when someone is among other people, they use a certain kind of impression that the one calls the "front stage". Consequently, the real self that someone has is called the backstage (ibid). This kind of metaphor can be transferred to the context of social media when prosumer produces content, and of course, their identity.

In the forum, the @bluepanda account is only known as the *suhu* of Sulwashoo and The History of Whoo brand, nothing more. Caroline is not pictured, as @Bluepanda's real self in the real world unless forum members meet face to face with her. In addition, they can also find out about other @Bluepanda through other social media accounts such as Instagram and Facebook, because @Bluepanda also has a fairly high activity in the two social media accounts.

@Lizvan account is currently no longer active in the Female Daily Forums as before, since @Lizvan has a permanent job in her real life. Online buying and selling activities are now no longer being implemented.

This shows that identity is still a challenging thing to explore and for the problems as well as answers to be found. Sherry Turkle (1984) in her work *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, which was the first important piece preceding the rise of the web 2.0, proposed that experiments in online identity extended this experience of offline identity as manifold, fluid, temporary and contextual. In online settings such as virtual community, identity processes are complex since numerous identity traces (such as one's gender) has a potential to be hidden, added or even changed.

## Conclusion

In relation with brand, communication and collaboration with brands is related to Anderson et al.'s interpretation of such activities as an illustration of consumer work, carried out to satisfy consumers' social desires and named "social labour" (2016). Social labour is defined as the tool by which users "add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content" (Anderson et al, 2016: 2).

Here, both @Bluepanda and @Lizvan fulfill the definition of "social labor" above. They both voluntarily share information about the brands they use to also be consumed by other forum members. Even @Bluepanda was assumed for being the Beauty Assistant of the two brands; something that is very far from reality, since in the real world Caroline as the owner of the account @Bluepanda is an employee at one of the companies that has nothing to do with the brand she uses. Likewise, @Lizvan.

However, both @Bluepanda and @Lizvan do not have problems with this assumption. They consider this reasonable as long as it does not interfere with their daily lives, especially the one related to the questions asked by users outside the forum, or brands that try to contact via other social media accounts owned by @Bluepanda or @Lizvan.

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**Article**

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**Contact email:** fatmadianpratiwi@gmail.com