Performing and Interpreting Identity

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Performing and interpreting identity through Facebook imagery

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Abstract
This one-year cyber-ethnography examines identity presentations and interpretations of 346 Facebook users. The social–psychological theoretical framework used drew specifically from symbolic interaction, Goffman’s performance of self, and schema theory. Generally, Facebookers sought social acceptance with their presentations. Primary findings indicate that the Facebookers present over-simplified imagery to reduce ambiguity and align with specific social groups. This study asked Facebookers to respond to strangers’ Facebook profiles, and the responses showed that due to the glut of identity-related information on the site, interpretations are heavily reliant on schemas. Online interview participants indicated several basic categories of identity performance that were used to assess others. Furthermore, online interview participants felt confident giving detailed descriptions of strangers’ personalities based on only a few minutes of viewing their profiles.

This article examines the role the images – specifically uploaded photos – play in online identity. Academics often hear grumblings from colleagues about college students using Facebook during class. It is often said that Facebook is largely a waste of time and outsider impressions of the site can be, thusly, quite negative. When coupled with the periodic headlines about some user posting information or images about illegal or lewd activity (underage drinking is a common example), these negative impressions of the site and its users only become more entrenched. This article is a part of an ongoing chain of research focusing on the ‘reasons’ for these presentation choices. This work specifically focuses on identity goals and images of Facebookers.

Facebook claimed 845 million users at the end of 2011 (Facebook Newsroom, 2012). Around 85% of all college students are said to be its users (Lampe et al., 2006). User numbers have been rapidly increasing for Facebook since 2005 and have coincided with a decline in the popularity of the previously top social networking site, MySpace.com (Compete.com, 2008).

As computer technologies in general and social media specifically grow even more enmeshed in daily existence (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), we begin to deal with deeper matters of its use. We live lives with a mix of interaction-types (Altheide, 1999; Boyd, 2004); sometimes we are communicating online, sometimes offline, and sometimes at an intersection of the two. This cyber-ethnography of Facebook helps illuminate the intersection. Since most Facebookers have overlapping online–offline networks (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), it makes sense to look at how social life works online, and the images of Facebook may be an important element in the equation. How are our impressions of others formed or influenced by the images of Facebook? What cognitive shortcuts do we use to sort through the glut of information on Facebook?

The overarching goals of this research are to further our understanding of how individuals present identity and interpret the identities of others online, specifically regarding the role of uploaded pictures and other images.
Conceptual framework

Facebook profiles can be thought of as an online embodiment of real persons using the site (Boyd, 2004; Boyd and Heer, 2006). The term ‘embodiment’ refers in this work to the individual’s representative in a computer-mediated interaction. In case of Facebook, the representative is the user profile, and the images within the profile provide a visual sense of the other. As technology continues to develop, online representatives will likely contain even more visual elements (Boyd and Heer, 2006). In the virtual world of Facebook, this embodiment is present even when the Facebooker signs off. Other users can still interact with it.

It is through a handful of visual components that the digital embodiment of the self becomes realized (Boyd, 2004). The profiles have conversations with each other; when we talk to someone online, we are talking to his or her profile (Boyd and Heer, 2006).

Performing identity through images

Facebookers tend to desire social acceptance. They seek this acceptance by presenting themselves in the best light possible. Others have described this presentation dynamic with the connections between the ‘actual self’ – those attributes possessed by an individual, the ‘ideal self’ – attributes the individual wishes to possess, and the ought self – attributes the individual believes he or she is expected to possess (Higgins, 1987; Siibak, 2009). Higgins’ ‘elves’ fit works nicely with the concept from Mead (1932, 1936), particularly the role of the ‘generalized other’, which is essentially a schema used to anticipate reactions of others based on attributes of the ought self. The Facebooker assesses the effectiveness of his actions and conducts future actions based on the responses or cues he gets from others (Goffman, 1969; Mead, 1932, 1936). The performer also gives both intentional and unintentional cues to his audience/audiences. Intentional cues are controlled messages and, in the current study, almost all visual components of a profile are considered intentional. Unintentional cues are often, in face-to-face interactions, nonverbal and include blushing, eye twitches, sweating, and so on. Recipients tend to put more stock in uncontrolled cues, but they are relatively few online (Ellison et al., 2006; Smith and Kollock, 1999).
Research shows that people tend to seek out information online that is not directly from the presenter, but is, rather, controlled by others with whom the presenter interacts (Walther et al., 2008). Walther et al. (2008), for example, examined the role friends (on Facebook) play in judging a person’s profile. Being judged by the company we keep is certainly not new to the social world, but it does present an interesting take on the search for and interpretation of intentional versus unintentional cues in social media.

In many social groupings, identities form the basis of in-groups and out-groups (Sherif and Sherif, 1964). In a desire for social acceptance, people tend to align themselves with particular groups while trying to avoid identification with other groups (Cochran et al., 1988). The differences among these groups are often exaggerated. People also choose groups on the basis of a need for ontological security, or what Laing (1969) explains as people’s desire to wake up in the morning knowing who they are and how they should act. Hogg and Reid (2006) similarly suggest that uncertainty reduction drives this categorizing of the self and others. Reliance on clear identity categories is likely for Facebookers, particularly given the potential for information overload. Furthermore, regarding uploaded images, the Facebooker is likely to upload images that she believes makes her look attractive, social, funny, and thoughtful (Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Young, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008).

Research shows that in computer-mediated communication, our identity performances tend to be exaggerated due to overcompensation for the lack of nonverbal or visual cues and possible unfamiliarity with the medium (Geidner et al., 2007; Smith and Kollock, 1999), and our performances within our reference group might become especially exaggerated online in an effort to look like the ‘best’ group member (Campbell, 2006). Furthermore, Zhao et al. (2008) suggest a conscious effort to construct identity with orientation toward the group. Geidner et al. (2007) suggest that individuals employ identity pegs and simple images or phrases that clearly show this group orientation. Wearing a T-shirt of a favorite sports team is an example of employing an identity peg. This is not to say that these presentations are false; rather, as has been found elsewhere (Ellison et al., 2006), Facebookers report that they are generally honest with their presentations. Identity pegs might be simply considered overemphasizing certain elements of one’s identity. Despite potential exaggeration, research suggests that Facebookers might be especially influenced to be honest and open on the site given that they are likely involved in what Zhao (2006) has called ‘anchored relationships’. That is, due to the expectation of face-to-face encounters and the possibility for embarrassment or shame that might come from online misrepresentations being called out, the Facebooker tends to be ‘honest’ in identity performances (Ellison et al., 2006; Rowatt et al., 1998).

Past research has given indicators of common presentation themes found on Facebook and other social networking sites. Along with others, Strano (2008) and Young (2008) have shown that sociability, attractiveness, sports, and humor are the key themes found in the online presentations, particularly with regard to Facebook. Furthermore, Strano (2008) suggests that older Facebookers tend to have more stability in their Facebook presentations and are more likely to present images of themselves alone.

In terms of interpreting others on Facebook, scholars have plenty of terms for processing the glut of identity information via mental shortcuts. ‘Chunking’, ‘twigging’, and ‘encoding’ are few examples used among media scholars to describe the process of breaking complex information into manageable mental categories (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Chase and Ericsson, 1982), but perhaps the term with the most extensive scholarly record for describing this phenomenon is ‘schema’ (see especially Bartlett, 1932). This basic cognitive mechanism allows humans to operate in a complex world by compressing a ‘large chunk of information into something understandable’ (Palfrey and
Gasser, 2008: 196). Cohen et al. (1993) describe schemas as ‘packets of information stored in memory representing general knowledge about objects, situations, events, or actions’ (p. 28). Bartlett puts it as a “schema” refers to an active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response’ (p. 201). In terms of the present study, the Facebooker has a mechanism that guides decisions, presentations, and interpretations. Bartlet further states that past experiences come ‘not simply as individual members coming one after another, but as a unitary mass’ (p. 201). Therefore, the Facebooker does not develop a schema from a single instance but a collection of experiences. In terms of Facebook, the individual would draw from thousands of experiences that occurred prior to even entering the site and use those experiences to understand, act, and react within the Facebook environment (Barber, 1990; Taylor and Crocker, 1981). When faced with information overload, Jones et al. (2004) suggest that most strategies involve simply avoiding processing. We categorize items and events based on either structure or function (Smyth et al., 1987). When applied to humans, structure would include the ‘appearance’ (shape, attractiveness, organization, hierarchy, etc.). Given the enormity of Facebook’s identity-laden presentations, it is likely that the individuals rely on schemas to sort through the data. However, research suggests that Facebookers are likely to draw conclusions about others from even quite minimal information (Ellison et al., 2006; Walther, 1992; Walther et al., 1994). Furthermore, individuals are more likely to ‘respond’ to simpler messages in overload environments. Additionally, Facebookers will tend to ‘create’ simpler messages in the face of information overload (Jones et al., 2004). Finally, scholars suggest that those adept at applying schemas tend to have the most success in information-heavy environments (Nishida, 2005).

Based on the aforementioned research and employing the symbolic interaction tradition and schema theory, the following research questions were posed:

**RQ1**: How do Facebookers use imagery to convey identity?

**RQ2**: How do Facebookers interpret imagery of other users to develop identity impressions?

This study aims to explore and analyze the social processes involved with construction and interpretations of identity on Facebook, specifically through uploaded photos. Empirically, the researcher hopes to convey what users do, what they do and do not think about, how they interact through images, and to explain how online- and otherwise-mediated presentations of the self-inform or -influence participants’ identity goals. Finally, this article seeks to examine how Facebookers interpret and categorize identity performances.

**Method**

This article is part of a larger, ongoing chain of research. A 12-month cyber-ethnography served as the principal data collection for this work. This ethnography took place from June 2008 through June 2009, and the typical research day involved 3–5 hours of researcher activity on Facebook. Ethnography itself offers a handful of advantages, with the bedrock assumption being that experience leads to understanding (Machin, 2002; Van Maanen, 1988). First, when studying an online group, it is only logical to use online methods that put us in that environment (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998). Second, participants in a study, such as this, presumably enjoy interacting online (Waskul, 2002). Facebookers were likely tech-savvy and possibly had a higher level of comfort (perceived safety, perhaps) in this sort of interaction (Miller and Slater, 2000). Third, recording, coding,
sorting by themes, and presenting are all made easier with digital data (Thomsen et al., 1998). Finally, costs (time and money) for both the researcher and the participants are greatly reduced when conducting online research (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998).

Procedures

This research began, as do most online ethnographies, with participant observation (Gilmore and Crissman, 1997; Waskul 2002; Williams and Copes, 2005). All participants in the study were informed prior to their agreement that observation was part of the research procedures. Using a researcher profile separate from the researcher’s personal Facebook account, connections were made with potential subjects through ‘Facebook friendships’, and the profile connected the researcher to additional participants indirectly through Facebook’s ‘people you may know’ function as well as recruitment recommendations from participants.

This research used the observation stage as preparation for the second stage, that is, interviews and guided tours. The objective was to identify a set of participants who were willing to meet face-to-face on a computer in a public area and give guided tours of their ‘average’ daily online activities, including their views on their own performance of self. This latter process is considered ‘guided tours’ (Boyd and Heer, 2006). These worked much like a tour of one’s home, moving from one area of the site to another. These interviews were conducted both online and offline and were largely unstructured, with only a small set of guiding questions at the onset (Waskul, 2002). The idea here was to interact with the participants in a number of environments and benefit from such corroboration (Paccagnella, 1997).

Subjects, sampling, and recruitment

Because of researcher’s affiliation with a large university in the Midwestern United States and a desire for face-to-face interviews, the focus was placed on the Facebook subnetwork (37,346 members as of 23 April 2008) linked to the university. Prior to contacting any potential participants, a researcher profile was created that included a description of the researcher, research intentions, larger research interests, informed consent information, and researcher contact information. The profile also included a recruitment statement asking for willing individuals to contact the researcher.

Next, contact was initiated with potential participants through two random letter searches in three large, common-interest groups and three small, specialized groups on Facebook. As described by Ellison et al. (2006), theoretical sampling was chosen for this research with the hopes that richer data, including sample populations (Facebook groups) of various sizes and areas of interest, would be provided. This sampling choice, of course, results in a loss of statistical generalizability. However, this type of sampling has been successfully employed elsewhere in qualitative research (see specifically, Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The three larger groups were the ‘class of 2009’ group (n ¼ 323 members), another group of university attendees claiming ‘native’ status devoted to the same state (n ¼ 4721 members), and a group devoted to the university’s popular head football coach (n ¼ 2223 members). The three smaller, specialized groups were titled, ‘The Office is the best show on TV, period’ (n ¼ 58 members), ‘Addicted to National Public Radio’ (n ¼ 29 members), and ‘Roald Dahl’s Stories are Scrumdiddlyumptious’ (n ¼ 16 members). Given the wide range of popularity of these groups (2223 members in the largest to 15 members in the smallest group), it was hoped that the total participant pool would provide a plethora of possible viewpoints and responses.
Members of these six Facebook groups who accepted the researcher’s friendship request numbered 346 in total (53% female, n = 185; 47% male, n = 161). During recruitment, participants were also asked to recommend other Facebookers that might take part in the study. About one third of all the participants were willing to suggest other members of their social network for recruitment. Such snowball sampling techniques have been often used with online social network research (see especially Brown, 2005). These 346 participants were followed during the observation period and recruited for interview participation. Of the original 346, 48 (28 female and 20 male) took part in the interview portion of the study. The ages of participants ranged from 21 to 34 years (mean = 23.06, median, 23.5, mode = 23), and most were juniors and seniors in college.

For each of the 346 participants, I viewed an average of 5 (sub)pages within their profile. I returned to individuals profiles primarily based on their activity on Facebook (for which Facebook gave me prompts). For the majority of the participants, this meant that I returned frequently to their pages. An estimated, 30,000 Facebook pages were viewed during the observation period.

Interviews

Usually, the first prompt for the participant was worded as, ‘Tell me what you would do during an average session on Facebook’. The answer guided the rest of the interview. The researcher was already familiar with most aspects of Facebook, but hearing each participant discusses it in his or her terms informed the overall understanding of each component. Every interview included at least some discussion of visual components of Facebook, most commonly the photos.

After discussing the elements of self-presentations, participants were asked to assess the presentations of others. Along with forming overall views of entire profiles, participants were asked to comment on a large set of photos and other images, such as profile decorations. These preselected profiles and sets of images were chosen based on the examination of thousands of examples over the months of the observation phase. The selected pieces were those that exemplified a group of images that commonly came up during the observations, those that were unique in some way, and those that were likely to provoke discussion by participants.

Periodically during interviews, problems arose with Internet connections and Facebook’s chat function. Additionally, online interview participants were continually shuffling through pages of Facebook both as part of the interview and as part of their own routines with the site. The combination of this multitasking and technical delays is reflected in the time record of interview segments included.

Throughout this work, a conscious effort is made to include the words and writing style (sometimes called ‘textspeak’, which often includes improper spelling, punctuation, and grammar) of the participants whenever appropriate. The exchanges presented in this document are taken without alteration from the digital record provided by Facebook’s chat function other than the use of pseudonyms. Thus, any typographical errors within those exchanges occurred intentionally or unintentionally during the interviews.

Results

Observation of Facebook profiles led to the view that certain visual components of Facebook receive much more attention than do the others. The three major image-based areas are bumper stickers and pieces of flair, uploaded photos (albums of pictures), and the individual profile image. These three visual components made up the bulk of the non-text viewing of Facebook pages in this
study and had the most identity-related meaning for the participants. Important to remember in all of this is the fact that Facebook, and any social group for that matter, continually shuffle through materials and meanings. That is to say that even though pictures will likely continue to be uploaded for the foreseeable future, bumper stickers and flair are fads that will pass. More important than these current tools is the ‘process’ behind their use. Profiles are constructed with goals in mind, and perhaps the most prominent goal is social acceptance.

**RQ1: How do Facebookers use imagery to convey identity?**

Partially due to the over-use of what Geidner et al. (2007) call identity pegs, Facebookers tend to exaggerate their identities toward a certain category. This exaggeration is possibly an attempt to ensure that the correct identity ‘interpretation’ occurs. The exaggeration can be thought of as over-emphasis on certain aspects of one’s identity to ensure correct categorization. Identity pegs on Facebook establish boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and they can perhaps be thought of as schemas for the self (Bartlett, 1932; Onorato and Turner, 2004). According to one participant, identity pegs say, ‘I belong to this group and not that group’. Many Facebookers believe that they can get a good understanding of another person, even complete strangers, simply through admittedly exaggerated Facebook profiles. Maddie acknowledged these exaggerations and said that although she was suspicious about the validity of Facebook presentations, she still relied on identity pegs for identity information.

10:30pm Researcher: do you think you can get a good idea of another person from FB? like… do you think it can help to understand someone’s personality?

10:31pm Maddie: No i don’t believe so . . . but i guess i still rely on it to some extent for information

10:31pm Researcher: what information can/do you get?

10:31pm Maddie: what people put on their profiles is pretty cliché, so you can get an overall set of interests or values, but it doesn’t really reveal the uniqueness of the person

10:33pm Researcher: so some people are more thoughtful and original?

10:33pm Maddie: I’d say so. A lot just put common popular things up though. Well I’m guilty of these things too… but people will put seasons as an interest, also mood states (ex. being happy) as interests, and foods. There are a lot of people who like romantic comedies, the Cubs, and the [university sports team]. Girls are worse at this than guys I think. So many profiles of girls look absolutely identical to a thousand other girls. Ditsy blonde, tan, drinker, partier.

The key to successful Facebook presentations, for participants in this study, lies in selecting the right images (Siibak, 2009). In everyday social life, humans must pick the groups with which he or she chooses to align, know what those groups value, and present identity pegs accordingly (Cooley, 1964). Facebookers are no different. They too must choose between groups and present valued identity pegs accordingly.

The most common identity pegs include general sports, specific teams, Greek life, university and high school affiliation, binge drinking, family, politics, and scholarship.
General sports. Sports is an ideal identity peg in terms of in-groups and out-groups. In sports, there are good guys (favorite teams), bad guys (opposing teams, rivals), and clear distinctions between the two. Having a general sports theme automatically calls out to other Facebookers. Facebookers using this peg list participation in various sports competitions, place sports in their interests, and have pictures of competition.

Specific sports teams. Aligning with specific sports teams, especially university, local, and regional teams, is a sure-fire way to create a bond with a lot of Facebookers. It is also an easy identity peg to maintain. Simply putting up a few bumper stickers, posting some pieces of flair, and including the teams in the interests section identifies the profile as a fan. Furthermore, part of the norms for many fans is a strong dislike (perhaps outright hatred) of rival sports teams. New York Yankee fans are supposed to hate Boston Red Sox fans. Oklahoma University fans are supposed to hate University of Texas fans.

Greek life. This identity peg is especially tricky. Membership in a specific Greek House would certainly draw friends from within the House, but rival Houses may be present. Furthermore, many non-Greeks have opposition to Greek life in general. However, defining successful impression management is up to each Facebooker. If the user wants to appeal to a specific House and most other Greek members (though perhaps not all), using such affiliations on the profile page is important.

University and high school affiliations. The common link in the subnetwork is affiliation with the university and high school settings. This is a certain way to find a common bond with thousands of others in the subnetwork. This was the reason for selecting Facebook in the first place for this research. It was thought that the university link would open access to potential participants through common connection with the researcher.

Binge drinking. Partying and the celebration of alcohol get presented in the Facebook photos more than anywhere else on Facebook. Although the culture of drinking on college campuses has carried over to Facebook, the disproportionate number of drinking pictures on Facebook is due, at least in part, to the norms surrounding digital cameras. As many Facebookers mentioned, no one takes pictures when they go to class, church, work, or any number of places that are part of his or her regular routine. However, whenever a group of friends are out at a bar, the digital cameras come flying out. Thus, these are the pictures that get uploaded the most. Additionally, they normally have social value in that the same friends that are in the pictures are likely on Facebook too.

Family. Images and text about family not only serve as a link to the family itself but also to a larger group of Facebookers who value family. These identity pegs most often come out with newlyweds and new mothers and fathers.

Politics. The bulk of this study was completed during the 2008 US Presidential race. Political presentations on Facebook, then, may have been inflated. Affiliations in this study leaned Democrat, which stands to reason given then-Senator Obama’s popularity on college campuses. Regardless, love for one party and hatred (or near-hatred) for the other party was a very common identity peg. This also showed up with some Facebookers posting links to liberal or conservative news stories, politicians’ web sites, and activist groups. Somewhat tied to the political
presentations was the group of Facebookers who identified with self-labeled ‘Hippie culture, commonly employing imagery of marijuana use as well as links to news stories about marijuana legislation, environmentalism, and war protests’.

Scholarship. Some Facebookers, mainly graduate students in this study, focused their imagery and text in a serious, scholarly presentation. Here, lists of favorites and hobbies included academic texts, research areas, and independent or foreign films. The photos in these presentations were often very limited, usually including some pictures from travel (usually not on a sunny beach). There are very few, if any, pictures containing alcohol. Online interview participants quickly identified the ‘scholarly’ Facebookers. Zhao et al. (2008) suggested that Facebookers would have a desire to have ‘thoughtfulness’ in the eyes of the audience, although not claim academic identities. The scholarly theme, therefore, partially supports the work of Zhao et al. (2008), but more work is warranted to differentiate differences between ‘thoughtful’ and ‘scholarly’. It is possibly explained by the difference between so-called ‘street-smarts’ (i.e. worldliness) and ‘book-smarts’.

Finally, there are thousands of specific interests that serve as identity pegs on Facebook. Popular culture provides the bulk of these interests. An example is participant Laura’s love for Harry Potter; her identity pegs are so numerous that they would no doubt catch the eye of other fans. Other examples include specific video games, television shows, and movies. The work of the Facebooker is to effectively (and convincingly) combine several identity pegs into a coherent identity presentation.

Effective combinations – based on interview responses – include one or two primary foci, leaving little room for unwanted interpretive freedom. The key is to present very positive, very simple messages. Ambiguity and subtlety also left room for interpretation. This attempt at removal of all ambiguity is perhaps a general symptom of computer-mediated communication more than it is a specific symptom of Facebook. It remains, though, that the Facebooker profiles that were judged as ‘successful presentations’ by their peers were simple, direct, and contained ‘positive’ imagery.

There are many types of images to employ as identity pegs on Facebook. The most common are bumper stickers and pieces of flair.

Bumper stickers and pieces of flair

Bumper stickers and flair serve as ‘profile decorations’ for Facebookers. They are quick and simple expressions of the self. They are like a poster hanging in a teenager’s bedroom. They are often simple and direct, but convey a deeper symbolic belonging. For the participants in this study, pieces of flair say ‘I belong to this group’ and ‘I’m proud to be in this group’. Often, these images come from the social group itself rather than simply being presented to the group. In this case, the Facebooker is simply following trends of the group, hoping to always be seen as a ‘good’ group member. For the most part, flair and bumper stickers are relatively mundane and can be easily accepted by all of one’s social subnetworks. Even if they are not in direct line with that subgroup’s values, the flair or bumper stickers do not necessarily contradict those values. Additionally, flair and bumper stickers are often given as gifts from one member to another, implying acceptance and encouraging display of the image. Figures 1 to 3 show the examples of pieces of flair that served as identity pegs for participants in this study.

A similar application on Facebook, ‘bumper stickers’, typically involves an image and a written message and is like a greeting card exchanged between friends. Both flair and stickers can be a gift or simply be selected and displayed by a single Facebooker. Bumper stickers are often collected as
Figure 1. Pieces of flair based on religion.

Figure 2. Pieces of flair based on sports teams.

a set of images on a Facebooker’s profile. The key to successful use of bumper stickers and flair relates directly to being able to predict how others will respond to such images (Mead, 1932, 1936; Siibak, 2009). That is, the Facebooker operates with a form of a generalized other to anticipate responses or reactions from her audience. Then, it is simply a matter of selecting and presenting the images that result in the desired reactions. A commonly desired reaction is based on the relational role of being a good friend and ‘thinking’ of others. One participant, Amber, discussed what bumper stickers mean to her; they are often a representation of friendship or perhaps intimacy between Facebookers.

1:31pm Amber: The bumper stickers are a fun time-waster. The are usually about current events, have movie jokes, or are just stupid things.

1:31pm Researcher: What do they mean?
1:32pm Amber: They are just “I miss you” or “I’m thinking of you” types of things. It’s about the same as sending someone an individual e-mail just saying ‘hi’.

Figure 4 shows the examples of bumper stickers.

Sex and humor are used frequently on Facebook, identity pegs included. The bumper stickers sent from one Facebooker to another also commonly contain some inside joke or shared interest. Additionally, stickers that send expressions of friendship and love are very popular. Not taking oneself too seriously, evidently, is a serious concern on Facebook. Perhaps the need for lightening the mood comes from posting so much information and so many photos about oneself.

Many Facebookers use bumper stickers or pieces of flair to convey personality. Facebookers also regularly get bumper stickers and flair from whom they consider good friends. Joey (and many
other Facebookers) talked about how awkward it would be to receive these expressions of friendship from strangers or mere acquaintances.

2:44pm Researcher: i am still trying to figure out the interest or popularity with these some seem funny, but i don’t know why people spend so much time with them is it mostly inside stories/jokes with friends?

2:44pm Joey: It’s really kind of a timewaster activity for me it is. I have made bumper stickers myself on occasion, with funny pictures I’ve seen online

2:46pm Researcher: and you send them to friends? or do you post on your own profile?

2:47pm Joey: yeah. some I put on my own wall, but rarely

Figure 3. Pieces of flair based on popular culture.
2:47pm Researcher: would it be weird for a stranger to send you one? would there be any circumstance where that would be normal? like … i’m guessing you don’t know all of your 513 friends REALLY well. would it be weird if someone who was just an acquaintance sent you one?

2:52pm Joey: can’t think of an occasion where it would be normal for a stranger or even an acquaintance to send me a bumper sticker would probably weird me out a little.

7:43pm Beth: it’s fun. just something fun and silly to send back and forth between friends you can say anything you want, such as ‘hey i’m thinking about you’

7:44pm Researcher: i see. so it would be weird if a stranger sent flair to someone?
Sex is like snow, you never know how long it will last or how many inches to expect.

I'm giving up my Virginity for lent.

I love Ramen Noodles and I'm excited!!

One does not simply walk into Wal-Mart.

There is evil there that does not sleep.
Figure 4. Ensemble of bumper stickers.

7:44pm Beth: i think so, yes

7:44pm Researcher: and they serve as sort of ‘thinking of you’ greeting card types of things?

7:44pm Beth: that’s one. it can also be flirty, teasing, etc

7:45pm Researcher: i see.

7:45pm Beth: you can also post your own. shows people what you are interested in

The first quote block above illustrates the relational importance of sending and receiving bumper stickers and flair. It is clear to Joey that these identity-laden items are not for strangers. After all, how could a stranger know an ‘inside joke’ or understand Joey at a deep enough level to know what flair fits his personality? Sending such items successfully, then, is both a confirmation that both
parties know each other well, have a shared understanding of the often subtle ‘inside’ messages behind flair and bumper stickers, as well as an unspoken acknowledgement that the two friends are, indeed, at that level of intimacy. In the second quote block, Beth highlights again the importance of shared understanding between parties and a mutual acceptance of the relationship level. ‘Thinking of you’, for Beth, is for friends while perhaps other relationships or aspiring romantic relationships can successfully use flair to flirt or tease. Regardless of the relationship’s intimacy level, for such gifts or images to be successful, both parties must accept the roles the other is assuming and placing (informal and unspoken, of course). Here is the crux of the identity work with regard to giving flair and bumper stickers.

Overall, flair and bumper stickers serve as primary identity pegs on Facebook. The key to successful use of these items is understanding the context, reading the cues from other users, and anticipating the reactions of one’s audience. Finally, it is important to note that the bumper stickers and flair are fads. They will likely pass out of popularity on Facebook. However, the overall mechanism at work here will remain long after these applications of the day are replaced.

**Facebook identity performance in pictures**

Photos – referred to simply as ‘pics’ by most Facebookers – are a dynamic element that drives a lot of activity on Facebook. As with other Facebook elements, the amount of time and energy spent on photos varies greatly from one Facebooker to another. Some have uploaded thousands of pictures, while others have only a few. At least some Facebookers are selective in the pictures they upload. Davey, who uploads only every now and then, talked about what makes a picture worthy of being uploaded.

2:54pm Researcher: what constitutes an exceptionally funny or unique pic?
    other than your profile pic, of course

2:55pm Davey: i drove to california over spring break for a funeral. and on the way i stopped in a town called cornville in AZ. first, do you know of the band called TOOL?

2:56pm Researcher: yeah

2:57pm Davey: ok. i have been a huge fan of theirs for like 12 years. their front man Maynard Keenan has a vineyard in cornville where he also lives. so i stopped through cornville and went to the winery, then at lunch at the town cafe, called the grasshopper. there is only like 480 people in the whole town. i think thats unique to have been there. and met the dusty old woman who waits tables at the grasshopper, that kinda thing. i like peoples vacation pictures

Mandy talked about when she is most likely to spend time looking through pictures.

I spend anywhere between 20-40 minutes on the site just as an entertainment tool to fight boredom. When this happens, I follow my usual routine, except I look at two additional browsing tools. The first is the photo album page. This is probably my only use of Facebook in which I would mildly admit to being a “facebook stalker.” I like to casually look through the photo albums that other friends have put up. Normally, I’ve already seen the pictures that my “real friends” have put up, because something about their status, notifications, or mini-feed has already alerted me to their new album. What I mean more specifically about this photo album browsing is that I’ll look through pictures of distant friends or acquaintances, just because the photos look interesting (and cuz I’m bored). Old high school friends,
co-workers, and people that I’ve lost touch with over the years fall into this category. I’ll click on their
photo albums and normally click through the pictures without leaving any types of comments. I asso-
ciate this with people who look at celebrity photos online … there’s no real purpose, sometimes it’s
just interesting to see what people are up to.

Uploading pictures is merely the first step. After that, the person who uploaded the picture goes
into a process of labeling, posting initial comments, tagging others who are involved (a process of
linking names and other profiles to an image), grouping pictures into an album, and selecting one
as the featured profile picture.

Once uploaded, the presenter often creates initial tags and comments. Tagging entails hyper-
linking an image or set of images to other Facebookers, based on naming those people in an image.
Commenting on an image is similar to adding a caption. Initial comments are usually descriptive,
but they occasionally include attempts at humor. Many comments are written as provocation for
responses, often mentioning out individuals by name. Some of these provocations go so far as
including a question to another user. For example, ‘What are you doing here, Tom?’ might be an
initial comment that would provoke ‘Tom’ to respond.

Many pictures receive responses from other Facebookers, who comment most frequently on
pictures involving humor, parties, weddings, and family. The tagging of others to a picture at times
causes conflict on Facebook, and the researcher considers a tagged image to be an example of
uncontrolled identity cues (Goffman’s 1967, 1969). The tagged person’s name shows up when a
visitor scrolls over the image, and potential conflict is realized when an unflattering picture is
uploaded and the individuals within it are tagged. Tagging and untagging (removing names)
individuals in pictures is often seen as a necessary chore. Kimberly, who considers herself a
conservative Facebooker, talked about how she approaches being tagged.

If someone has tagged pictures of me I go through them and untag any pictures that I am drinking in or
pictures where there is a lot of alcohol around me. This is required for my sorority, but I also do it because
I don’t want that to people other people’s perception of my. I think it is really unattractive when girls look
like alcoholics in all of their pictures, and that is not the image I want to portray myself as.

Although Facebookers typically suggest that they feel completely uninhibited in what images they
post, they usually refrain from certain images and frequently untag themselves from ‘unflattering’
pictures. Most participants, though, do not adjust their settings but, rather, choose to control the
message. Such social circles have adopted unwritten standards of conduct. Impression manage-
ment came up frequently in the interviews, especially when discussions focused on photos. Gabbie,
a diligent ‘untagger’ of photos, was very concerned about impression management in general. She
controlled both the message and audience through privacy settings and by simply not uploading
many pictures.

No one sees my pictures but me. When I was younger, I uploaded almost everything that was in my
camera. Now, though, I’m more mature. Also, I untag my name in pics all the time. I think it’s rude
to tag someone in a pic if it is unflattering. That pic might be the only impression someone has of you.
I just don’t think people think when they are uploading everything from their camera and tagging
everyone. They don’t think about all the people who might see them. – Gabbie

In spending months perusing images – in 10 months or so, this project has been underway,
probably around 10,000 images were viewed – and talking with Facebookers, a handful of picture
categories developed.
Interpreting pictures and developing schema

RQ2: How do Facebookers interpret imagery of other users to develop identity impressions?

It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. As a hypothesis about localization of function, the statement is not quite right – the brain and not the eye is surely the most important organ involved . . . Whether it is beautiful or ugly or just conveniently at hand, the world of experience is produced by the man who experiences it (Neisser, 1967: 3).

The list of image categories below, created from participant reactions to others’ presentations, includes the most commonly identified schemas used for interpreting others’ identities. These schemata allow Facebookers to form quick judgments and avoid deeply examining potentially thousands of images in doing so (Bartlett, 1932). The primary schemata found in this study are social (including subcategories of the buddy picture and the drinking/party picture), humorous, vanity, and sports. For the most part, these categories support the findings of past research on photo selection, (Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Young, 2008). One difference from previous findings, however, is the inclusion of what this study’s participants called ‘Vanity’ pictures. These images appear to be the failed attempts at posting attractive images. Therefore, while they connect with the attempt for attractiveness indicated by earlier research, they do not achieve those goals and are therefore moved into a separate category. They, along with a subset of drinking pictures have failed to generate such responses from the participants in this study, and this ‘negative-response-inducing’ is a key point of distinction regarding this study’s findings in relation to past research. Brief descriptions of the most common image-related schemata are given below.

The social picture. This very common picture involves two or more individuals leaning in for a photo. Social pictures can be without alcohol (buddy picture) or with alcohol (drinking picture), but the primary ingredient is showing the Facebooker with multiple friends. Facebookers in this study thought that these pictures showed that the person was popular, friendly, and outgoing. As Davey put it, ‘the fact that im in pictures with people is proof positive that i actually do have friends outside of facebook! having pics of just myself would look like i’m totally self centered’. Figures 5 to 9 show the examples of buddy picture and drinking pictures.

In Figure 9, an individual is finishing a shot amongst a cheering group of onlookers. Figure 9 is an example of a negative-response-inducing image. This subject was seen as a ‘big partier’ by almost everyone who looked at the image for part of this research. The facts that the subject appears to be ‘working the crowd’ made many interviewees think this was not her first or last shot of the night and that she is the sole focus removes, in the eyes of participants in this study, any qualities of sociability from the image. Overall, this image received a very negative assessment by the Facebookers in this study. Descriptions of this Facebooker included, ‘look[s] like a drunk,’ ‘reckless,’ and ‘clearly has a drinking problem’.

Humor pictures. As mentioned earlier, nearly all attempts at humor are well received on Facebook. Many Facebookers, therefore, include humor in the presentation of self through the pictures they upload. Funny pictures were the one area where the use of solo shots was not detrimental to assessments from others. In these images, the individual has either an unusual facial expression or an unusual body position or some sort of prop that adds an element of humor. An example of this is Figure 10, which received positive assessments by participants. The subject was seen as ‘not taking him[her]self too seriously,’ ‘pretty funny,’ and, interestingly, participants tended to view those
Figure 5. Social (buddy) picture of three women.
Figure 6. Social (buddy) picture of three women posing on boat.
Figure 7. Social (drinking) picture of two women posing with shot glasses.
Figure 8. Social (drinking) picture of two women embracing at beer table.

who used humor in their presentations as ‘nicer’. The link between humor and kindness came up periodically throughout the components of Facebook.

Vanity picture. A surprisingly large number of pictures uploaded showed subjects in very little (sometimes no) clothing. Interpretations of these images went in one of two ways. Either the image
Figure 9. Social (drinking) picture of a woman in a crowd taking shot.
Figure 10. Humor picture of a man and woman posing.
was seen as what one Facebooker labeled ‘intentionally ironic’ and was accepted positively as an attempt at humor or the image – when no humor was present and obvious – was seen as vanity. Commenting on her overall impression of what she considered vain pictures, Gabbie said, ‘The person is attractive, but they know it, and they love to see themselves and be seen by others. It actually makes them less attractive’. Two examples labeled by participants as vain are given below. Each of the images has the individual at the center of the frame, and each of the two pictures includes only one subject.

Figure 11 shows a bikini-clad woman alone on a rock, which serves as a pedestal. Facebookers viewed this as having a thread of vanity as it was uploaded by the woman in the picture. As one Facebooker put it, ‘she clearly is an attention-seeker’.

Figure 12 has an even stronger focus on the body. The use of black and white coloring by the Facebooker serves to enhance the subject’s muscle definition. Facebookers took a strong dislike to this image. Most said they respected the subject’s physique but wondered what the purpose of posting such a picture was. Most viewed this image as vanity. References were also made regarding the high number of total solo shots (pictures that do not include other people) in this subject's photo album. Interpretations of solo shots in general were more negative than those of group pictures. Typically, if an individual posted more than a handful of solo shot pictures, they
were seen as being ‘a little too camera happy’ and ‘self centered’.

*Sport picture.* Pictures that show off athleticism were seen as positive. Participants felt these images show a ‘healthy’, ‘balanced’, and ‘motivated’ personality. An example is given in Figure 13.

Participants felt that sport pictures run the risk of vanity, if the image is a solo shot or staged. In the above case, though, the individual was seen as healthy, strong, motivated, and, of course, athletic, overall, this category gave mostly positive impressions of the individuals.

In summary, the creation of meanings for images was work done largely by those interpreting the images rather than those actually posting images. The categories suggested by participants showed clear support for findings in past research that suggested image themes of attractiveness, sociability, humor, and sports, with new subsets for failed sociability attempts (drinking) and failed
Figure 12. Vanity picture of a man posing topless.

attractiveness attempts (vanity). Furthermore, Facebookers in this study may have tried to stick to a ‘consistent’ identity, but the viewers, in an effort to minimize mental effort, quickly placed photo
albums into specific categories or schemas. Interpreting the thousands upon thousands of potential images in the world of Facebook requires Facebookers to partake in what some scholars call chunking, twigging, and encoding (Chase and Ericsson, 1982; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), and the results of this study certainly support past research on information processing. Certainly, the findings show particular support for the psychological shortcuts outlined most aptly in ‘schema theory’ (see especially Bartlett, 1932).

**Profile pictures**

The profile picture is located in the top, left corner of the Facebook profile, so the eye is naturally drawn to it. Additionally, it is the most prominent image on the profile page. Additionally, the profile picture is included alongside every message sent by the user. As a result, this picture is viewed much more frequently than other uploaded pictures and is considered a first impression (Figure 14). Users such as Davey like to use shock value and (twisted?) humor in their first impressions.

2:22pm Researcher: Tell me about your profile pic.

2:22pm Davey: haha yeah. I was a film student, and i messed around with make up FX a little, so i decided i would freak people out a little. i got some good reactions.
Figure 13. Sporty picture of a man shooting jump shot.

2:23pm Researcher: And did it get a lot of reactions? Joking around seems to be a common theme on facebook.

2:23pm Davey: yeah. Lot’s of people sent me messages about it. and yeah, joking is a common theme for me anyway!

Davey believes his profile picture shows that he does not take himself too seriously, is not afraid of pushing the envelope or being outlandish, and likes to entertain people. Laura, a library and information science graduate, a member of the Tuesday Night Harry Potter Appreciation Group on Facebook, and a self-described ‘slightly naive, vegetarian, cat-lady-in-training’, felt the following profile picture conveyed her personality and career perfectly (Figure 15).

6:17pm Researcher: i notice you have a illustration as your profile pic . . . any background to it?

6:17pm Laura: it is the cover of my favorite book, “The Library” by sarah stewart and david small. it is a picture book about a woman who spends her whole life reading

6:18pm Researcher: seems appropriate for such an avid reader, and it even has a cat in the picture.
Figure 14. Profile picture of Davey.
Figure 15. Profile picture of Laura.
After talking with her, Laura’s choice of this image has clear connections to how she views herself and wishes to be seen by others. The image is quite direct – a woman with her nose buried in a book, towing a wagon of books with her cat – but also includes a more-subtle identity presentation. Laura’s friends in the library, perhaps, would recognize the image from the book and perhaps even know the character. It is kind of an ‘insider’ presentation. Of course, Laura was more than happy to explain the image to the researcher and, presumably, anyone else who asked about it. In this way, the image instigated further identity work in talk of the book, character, and her relation to the character. Few profile pictures contained such direct and indirect identity presentations.

Discussion

In summary, the results of this study support past research in that bumper stickers, pieces of flair, or other imagery on Facebook serve as identity pegs that signal (desired) affiliation with a particular group (Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Young, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008). As one participant put it, identity pegs are ‘quick-and-easy signals to [visitors] and show larger characteristics and personality traits of the person’.

In terms of uploaded photos, by choosing which pictures to upload, selecting profile pictures, adding comments to images, and cutting out unflattering images completely, Facebookers employed impression management tactics, which lends support for previous research (Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Young, 2008). Clearly, some pictures are not presenting a favorable self to the participants in this study, and these negative-response-inducing images mark an area of departure for this study from previous findings. Those Facebookers who present images that show them as vain or drunk to participants in this study may be performing for more-accepting groups, ignoring negative responses, or are simply unaware of how their images are being interpreted. More research is warranted on the reasons that such negative-response-inducing images remain on one’s profile.

The profile picture chosen by Facebookers is often selected with a specific reaction in mind. This anticipation of positive responses supports past findings regarding profile image selection (Campbell, 2006; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008). Since the profile picture is connected with each message sent on Facebook, including the initial friendship request, it could possibly be considered a first impression.

Bartlett (1932) stated that recognition requires a specific sensory reaction and a loosely targeted attitude toward “the whole” subject (p. 191). In terms of the present study, the Facebooker has a specific response to an image, and she has an attitude toward a general category of images (Geidner et al., 2007). Schemas littered the interpretive side of this symbolic interaction equation, and schema theory also, of course, has its place in the formation of identity pegs on the presentation side. However, this study found that the image selection process was more easily tied to reference group theory (Sherif and Sherif, 1964) and uncertainty reduction (Hogg and Reid, 2006) tactics through the symbolic interaction tradition (Goffman studies; Mead studies) rather than schemata. In general, participants so easily dissected Facebook images that it appeared they had seen enough to know (or at least have a strong opinion about) the most common categories, the types of people who presented each type, and a statement indicating their valence for the image and person. The images of both in-groups and out-groups should be easily identifiable so that the performer risks no confusion of alliance. In this way, Facebook pictures might also be thought of as identity pegs (Geidner et al., 2007), both bringing the presenter into the in-group and setting him or her against the out-group.
It is a rare thing for a picture to receive a negative comment from another Facebooker. Overall, there is a lack of negative feedback on images, and this lack of negative response to images is, in terms of symbolic interaction, interpreted as confirmation of a successful presentation. This, then, strengthens the Facebooker’s confidence in that type of imagery. If a cycle of ‘bad’ pictures continues to get no response long enough, it should result in a close friend – who would have the type of relationship that could support a confrontation – speaking up. However, the norm of nonresponsiveness on Facebook appears to be contributing to the plethora of images that are interpreted negatively by so many within and without this study. For example, images of binge drinking or using drugs often go unchallenged, and are therefore seen as ‘accepted’ in the eyes of the presenter.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

The fact that Goffman’s concepts and symbolic interaction in general fit so well is a testament to their strength as descriptors of social life. Methodologically, Facebook turned out to be a site of study filled with data. The endless stream of raw data, the nature of digital data, and the enthusiasm of the users led to a researcher-friendly field. Furthermore, the observation period allowed an adequate development of ideas that subsequently served as a backdrop for the interview and guided tour portions. Moreover, the interviews allowed participants a depth of feedback that would not have been available with most other methods. Finally, the period of the study allowed for tracking activity and changes over time, an important element in the symbolic interaction tradition. Future research might examine the doublethink Facebookers displayed about self-presentation versus their interpretation of others’ performances. In discussing their own profiles, Facebookers acknowledged that their images did not give a complete picture, but participants almost always thought others’ images gave sufficient information to form strong opinions about those others. Furthermore, as Facebook’s user demographics continue to evolve, future research should move beyond college students. A considerable limitation is the possibility for self-selection bias. Facebookers in this study volunteered, and though potentially diverse groups were selected, it might be the case that those wishing to partake in such a study would carry a more positive view of the site in general compared with nonparticipants. Also, a social desirability bias is possible with regard to the interview portion of the study. Additionally, though some of the norms and behaviors found might be shaped by the nature of computer-mediated communication itself, many are presumably socially and culturally constructed. Facebookers located in regions outside the Midwestern United States would likely have different sets of norms and behaviors. Finally, Facebook trends and fads found in this article are likely to pass, even if the basic symbolic interaction premise remains. Thus, future research will always be warranted and needed to assess/reassess social–psychological processes within the ever-changing online community.

References

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