

# **Real Identity and Authenticity are facades on social networking sites**

## **Abstract**

This paper puts forward the idea that social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook are detrimental to one's identity and self-presentation online. Social media is essential in forming user's real identity as it has been proven that the amount of time an individual spends scrolling on these online sites has a direct impact on their self-esteem, confidence, anxiety and depression levels and even authenticity. These factors are leading to an increase in the level of inauthenticity a user may portray on SNSs. There are also influences like the need for validation and trends that affects the way a normal person would project himself online. This paper lines up with the concept of identity in communities and networks as it shows how social media is pushing users to knowingly or unknowingly express a fake identity and consequently to not be authentic in society.

**Keywords:** Social media, online identity, Instagram, self-presentation, Inauthenticity.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to study the lack of authenticity of users online through alteration of their identity. It will focus on the multiple layers of identity in general on social networking sites, especially Facebook and Instagram, and the ways it enables users to manipulate their authenticity and self-representation. It will delve deeper into topics such as the use of pseudonyms and anonymity on SNSs to hide one's real identity. While the founder of Facebook refutes any modification of identity and stand by the fact that their company ensures that users' stay authentic through the process of registration, Facebook is considered the most famous site for trolling or catfishing. Additionally, Instagram is having more and more cases of fake accounts called 'Finsta' as users are willing to have planned self-presentation (Kang & Wei, 2019). I will be exploring the features such editing tools, trends or challenges, that encourage identity-play. Finally, I will be giving examples and use studies to illustrate how inauthenticity and trolling are extremely common on social media sites.

## **Social Networking Sites and its effect on Identity**

Boyd & Ellison (2007) state that social networking sites are internet-based facilities that build a close or semi-private profile within a limited organization. They allow users to create a list of friends who they approve of and interact with them, formally or casually. While joining an SNS platform, an individual must fill out a series of question to verify his name, age, email address, interests and their profile photo. Then the user must make the decision whether he wants his profile to be private-which will be visible to only his list of friends or public and in that case, anyone online can have access to it (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media sites have caused major shifts in people's lives especially on the virtual sphere. When SNSs first became popular, users were not interested on conversing with strangers but rather in solidifying their existing offline relationships (Papacharissi, 2009). Over time and with millennials joining social media, this concept has changes as they do engage with strangers online and offline as well as disclose private information. While social media enables peer-to-peer communication and is beneficial for the growth of an individual, it can be noxious for one's wellbeing online and offline. For a few decades, SNSs have been criticized for causing users to modify their real identity hence impacting on their authenticity online. It can be

highlighted that these sites create a great contrast between an individual's identity he grew up with and his online self.

Identity can be defined as 'who an individual is' (Knight & Saxby, 2014). Extrapolating this definition, it refers to the physical facts that cannot be separated from one person such as DNA and the biographical elements that include one's name or gender. Identity encompasses personality, mannerism and interests. However, identity is shaped overtime as exposure to society, situations in life or the different roles that are led. This causes people to have different identities to fit in different roles. A student may be obedient and shy at school but extrovert and troublesome within the barriers of his home. In the long run, self-presentation, also known as 'impression management' fluctuates to respond to cultural expectations or even peer pressure in the case of younger audiences. Hu, Kumar, Huang & Ratnavelu (2017) state that the self can be classified into three categories namely: the 'actual self' which are how an individual or his entourage believe his traits are, the 'ideal self' which refers to the characteristics one wishes to own and the 'ought self' which one or others want to see in individuals such as responsibilities or duties. Hence, the three categories can be applied to someone's online identity as well.

Digital identity is mostly constructed and can be altered in various ways such as name to appearance to living locations. This can be an advantage in certain cases such as people who want to keep a strict privacy rule, but this makes the virtual world trickier to navigate on. When Friendster or Facebook first came out to the public, people were not disclosing their identity and preferred the safeness that anonymity brought to them (Stoller, 2013). It is important to acknowledge the extent to which online personae have evolved with years and what they have become. Younger generations have grown up with the accessibility to Facebook and Instagram which makes them not be afraid of the consequences of social media. While their parents might think twice before posting something online, students share mostly everything attached to their real-life identity (Stoller, 2013). Factors that drive people to alter their identity can vary from person to person, yet the most relevant ones will be discussed below.

### **The use of Pseudonyms online**

There are several factors that support the theory of the multi-faceted self. Pseudonyms have to be the first factor that pushes users to publish deceptive information. Due to the rise in technology and growth of social media, identity takes on a completely different meaning online. While some users stay partially true to their real self, many fall into the black hole of social media. Social media influences the way we identify and present ourselves virtually. The use of pseudonyms dates to writers using fake names to preserve their privacy (Hogan, 2013). Pseudonyms or account ID are the usernames that people identify as online. Instagram handles are not always true to what a person is in offline environments. Many users tend to use abbreviation of their names or take inspiration from their interests in their offline lives. There are three motivations behind the use of pseudonyms: (1) Functional motivations, (2) situational motivations or (3) personal motivations. In the setting of hiding one's true identity, personal motivations are involved whereby the user is willing to discard their real self-presentation in order to put forward antisocial behaviors like untruthfulness (Hogan, 2013). Facebook is one the most popular social media platform and has 2.32 billion users interacting worldwide ("Facebook users worldwide 2018 | Statista", 2019). Although Mark Zuckerberg insists in the fact that he believes having two sets of identities is an act of cowardice and lack of honesty. He assures that there are proper measures taken to prevent

that but still, there are enumerable troll accounts and meme accounts made up by users who stay hidden behind a false username.

### **The lack of authenticity on SNSs**

With all the problems attached to digital identity and the fragmentation of the true self online, authenticity has been at a high risk. Indeed, authenticity is being manipulated by users to portray another identity. Authenticity can be viewed from different perspectives as it depends on the context and the circumstances. It can be what is genuine and not an imitation or what has been authorized with a real stamp that certifies its legitimacy (Van Leeuwen, 2001). In this context, authenticity is about the reality behind something or someone and the profoundly felt feelings or words that are being expressed (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Authenticity is socially constructed as it can be influenced by norms or offline and online expectations (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). Hence, it is inevitable that social media will impact on people's authenticity as it is engraved in their daily lives. Social media is killing authenticity of users which reflects on their digital identity as well as impacting on their offline selves. This has to do with personal branding and performativity. Having an account on social media nowadays resumes to 'selling' one's life as a brand. Firstly, social media platforms are not free for any reasons. They are using people's information to their own advantage. Secondly, users are so engulfed into the spiral of projecting themselves and having a nice aesthetics online that they start to produce content that reflect their personal brand when combined altogether (Stoller, 2013). They 'perform their brand which drifts them away from their authentic selves. But then again, why is every post on Facebook timeline or Instagram feeds similar? Why are users interested in the amount of likes and shares, more than communicating or collaborating online which was the essence of social media long time back.

### **The need for 'self-presentation and extremities of inauthenticity on Instagram**

Furthermore, being obsessed with the idea of having the best feed and projecting the perfect life, users follow what influencers or celebrities do to boost the views on their posts. Salisbury & Pooley (2017) support what many other researchers have stated that the true definition of authenticity online is "artificial category". Another factor to consider is that it is mostly teenagers that get easily influenced and this may have an impact on their real identity being shaped into a 'plastic' person. Celebrities receive enormous amount of attention on social media. They are considered as trend setters, motivational thinkers and influencers. The media also portrays the ideal self especially for women, to be skinny and attractive (Wiederhold, 2018). Most celebrities perpetuate this trend which impacts on the self-esteem of users. They want to achieve that look and be famous on social media. To do so, many edit and use filters on their photographs to obtain the 'ideal' look (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016).

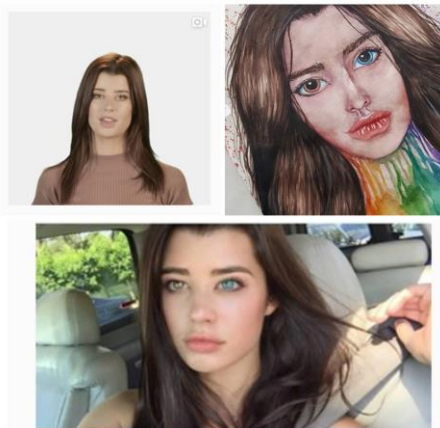
Although before Web 2.0 took over, the manipulation of photos seemed banal and considered to be an artistic genre (Bakhtin, 1981, as cited in Zappavigna, 2016), SNSs intertwined with users demands suggest otherwise. The statistics on a study on practicing self-portraits, also known as selfies, revealed that a teenager takes up to 60 photos before choosing one to upload on Instagram (Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009). Another study discovered that filters are the new natural on Instagram. A user applies an average 13 filters to his photo collection to ameliorate his aesthetic feed and indirectly, his personality (Ferberda, Schedl & Tkalcic, 2016). These studies prove that users are not interested into portraying their real identity or

authenticity on their profiles. Instead, they are inclined to portray an ideal identity as they are looking for likes and more views from their audience

Jackson & Luchner (2018) argue that users feel the necessity to belong to a community and have the need to showcase their self-presentation. Social networking sites refute the idea of self-presentation as the feature of liking and commenting on other posts can sometimes affect the self-esteem of oneself (Besser & Priel as cited in Jackson & Luchner, 2011). What pushes users to project their 'fake authenticity' is that they want to gain recognition and accumulate more likes. A trait that most people have is the demand to be recognized (Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009). Even if a user is authentic online and wants to maintain his real identity, feedback and reactions will lower his willingness to be real. This may have a negative impact on users' mental health. Sleep deprivation, fear of missing out and body shaming are issues associated with social media (Wiederhold, 2018). A study conducted by Reece & Danforth in 2017, revealed that users who used darker and grayer color filters on their Instagram posts were prone to be depressed or on the edge of depression. Nonetheless, in today's day and age, having a darker feed is trendy and users who are not depressed, portray a character that may have issues just to receive attention.

### **Finsta**

A rising issue on Instagram is that users are creating fake accounts called 'Finsta'. According to (Kang & Wei, 2019), the motives of the creators of Finsta accounts are to fully express themselves without being judged. Having the ideal self-presentation can cause a teen to create a Finsta account for the sake of expressing himself without being worried of receiving views or likes (Wiederhold, 2018). On the other hand, some misuse the ability to change the way they can present themselves online. One example is Sarah Rose Mcdaniel, an American model, who states that she has heterochromia, a difference in coloration and in her case, one blue eye and one brown eye.



She made videos about how she was bullied as a child for having two-colored eyes but is now able to differentiate herself from other models. People having heterochromia were very supportive and felt empowered. However, she was exposed by fake accounts as she was faking that story to enter a modeling agency. She is now undergoing surgeries to have one blue eye. This goes on to prove her lack of authenticity and also how the lies she was carrying online, impacted her offline life.

## **Conclusion & Limitations**

Overall, there are different existing reasons as to why social media sites allow causes people to transform their identity and be inauthentic. Social media platforms have features such as creating fake profiles, using other names, liking and commenting on each other uploads, applying filters to photographs as well as following the path of celebrities, all of which add up to be damaging to any avid user. The challenge of satisfying the trend on SNSs have increased the number users leaving behind their true self to adopt and perform a fake identity to attract followers or validation. This has a direct impact on their health and is so engrained in today's culture that it seems normal. To solve these issues, users tend to fall deeper in the trap by trying to showcase an ideal identity online. Users are not interested in providing good content but rather clickbait that will bring them followers. Ultimately, identity and authenticity are facades on social media sites which will spread unless users take matters into their hands.

This paper has a few limitations as although most of the articles referenced are reliable and up to date, a few of them were in my opinion, biased towards the positive side of social networking sites which is the contrary of what I wanted to showcase. Most of the papers were targeting the American society and the findings may not be applied to developing countries. Also, the results obtained through the studied mentioned were conducted with mainly white American or Asian users therefore the findings cannot justify the thoughts of other races across the world. Despite the limitations, the paper focuses on the data available to discuss and present a strong argument on the topic.

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