

Life is a Performance: Facebook, Self-Representation and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

This paper argues that idealistic self-presentations on Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook risk damaging other users' self-esteem by portraying and disseminating unrealistic personas, ideals and lifestyles and thereby triggering upward social comparisons. Using the concept of identity as a performance, as coined by Goffman (1959), this paper explores the opportunities for identity performance afforded by SNS such as Facebook through their architecture and design. Citing the research results reported in several peer-reviewed articles to support its argument, this paper also highlights the link between idealistic self-presentations, upward social comparisons on Facebook and negative impacts on other users' self-esteem.

Keywords: Social media, social networking sites, Facebook, self-esteem, depression, social comparison

Life is a performance. As humans, during our face-to-face social interactions, we perform the identities we construct for ourselves in an attempt to engage with our peers and gain their acceptance. Using various verbal and non-verbal cues, we adapt these identity performances according to our audience and social context – whether it be among family at home, friends at dinner, or colleagues in the workplace. In comparison to the offline space, however, the online space affords a much wider stage for identity performance to take place. Much like theatre actors playing a role, when we perform our identities online through SNS such as Facebook, we can choose to take on a persona and portray an ideal, mood or lifestyle that may differ greatly from our personal reality in an attempt to put on our very best performance and win popularity with our audiences. These idealistic self-presentations on SNS, however, can trigger other users

to make upward social comparisons, creating the assumption that their lives are less happy and fulfilling than others' and damaging their self-esteem.

Identity as a performance is not a new concept or one that is synonymous only with SNS such as Facebook. Indeed, as Goffman (1959) highlights (as cited in Pearson, 2009, para 4), identity as a performance is an inherent part of human social interaction. Much like theatrical performances, identity performances are not static, but fluid – we construct and perform our identities to adapt appropriately to our various audiences and social contexts. In comparison with face-to-face social interactions, however, the online space utilised by SNS such as Facebook affords users greater ability to experiment with, control and mediate their performed identities as well as the ability to eliminate physical non-verbal cues to present themselves in a way which may greatly differ from their personal reality (Pearson, 2009). Indeed, Chou and Edge (2012) highlight that individuals tend to present themselves in a favourable light on their Facebook profile pages. With face-to-face interactions, people are restricted in their identity performances by the physical non-verbal cues that may reveal additional information concealed or conflicted by verbal cues. In contrast, however, with online interactions on Facebook, users are disembodied and removed from their physical non-verbal cues, allowing them the freedom to construct and perform any variety of identities they wish to portray.

When presenting themselves online on Facebook, users have a variety of tools and techniques at their disposal to construct and perform their chosen identities. These are provided by the affordances of the platform's architecture and design, and include the ability to choose and upload a desired profile photo and other images a user wishes to share, the ability to search and traverse across the platform to include weak ties in addition to close ties to expand a user's 'Friends' network, and the ability to use 'Like's as a metric for popularity.

In their study of children aged 11-16 across three European countries, Mascheroni, Vincent, and Jimenez (2015, p. 5) found that most children – both girls and boys – edited their profile photos on SNS platforms to portray themselves in an idealistic way rather than as their real-life selves. Moreover, although SNS users may take multiple ‘selfies’ (a self-portrait image, typically captured with a smartphone) over a given period, they are selective in which of these images they choose to post to their profile pages (Wagner, Aguirre, & Summer, 2016, para 29). Furthermore, as Vogel, Rose, Roberts, and Eckles (2014, p. 207) highlight, SNS such as Facebook also enable users to selectively upload to their profile pages a variety of images which portray themselves and their lives in a way which best represents how they wish to be portrayed – rather than in a way which resembles their personal reality. Collectively, these carefully selected images provide a vivid visual representation of a user’s chosen performed identity for others to view, further reinforcing and manifesting their constructed, idealised identity in the minds of others.

In addition to selectively uploading images consistent with their performed online identities to their profile pages, Facebook users have the ability to not only directly search for weak ties via the site’s search function, but also to traverse the ‘Friends’ networks of other users to locate weak ties in an attempt to further expand their own ‘Friends’ network. While the ability to add weak ties to a Facebook user’s social network provides the user with clear benefits, such as the ability to maintain contact with people they may have otherwise forgotten or lost contact with in the rapid and ever-changing pace of everyday life, it also presents the opportunity to make a user’s social network appear much larger and more far-reaching than it is in reality. Weak ties – such as those with ex-colleagues and other distant connections – serve a positive function in information and support exchange and in creating a heterogenous social network, but they lack the closeness, depth and intimacy of strong ties – such as those with family, close friends and romantic partners (Pearson, 2009). As Cummings et al. (2000) argued (as cited in Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin, 2007, p. 737),

relationships which are established and predominately maintained online, as in the case of weak ties, are typically of lower quality than those established and predominately maintained offline, as in the case of strong ties. Characterised by low time, effort and emotional investment, the arbitrary inclusion of weak ties in a Facebook user's 'Friends' network enables the user to convey a seemingly large and far-reaching social network of friends. Whereas face-to-face interactions do not typically present opportunities to elicit information about an individual's social networks, Facebook explicitly allows users to elicit information about both the quantity and quality of people in a user's social network (Vogel et al., 2014). As Chou and Edge (2012, p. 118) highlight, both the quantity and the perceived attractiveness of a user's Facebook friends can be construed by other users as a reflection of the user's popularity and "social attractiveness". Therefore, despite fostering in many cases predominately high-quantity, low-quality weak ties, Facebook users can utilise the affordances of the platform to convey to other users the impression of not only a seemingly large, but also a seemingly high-quality network of friends, further perpetuating their idealistic identities.

Additionally, Facebook users can utilise the platform's 'Like' function as a metric for their popularity and the popularity of other users. According to Chen and Lee (2013), at the end of 2011, Facebook users had collectively uploaded 250 million photos and clicked Facebook's 'Like' button 2.7 billion times each day. As well as providing users with a way of expressing their agreement with or pleasure at another user's post (text or image) and maintaining casual engagement with weak ties, Facebook's 'Like' button also functions as a self-promotion tool (Chen & Lee, 2013). The more 'Like's a Facebook user accrues for their particular post, the more popular the post, and, moreover, they as a person, are perceived to be. Therefore, accumulating 'Like's on Facebook by posting selective content tailored to their perceived audience is another way for users to portray to others an idealistic self-presentation that depicts themselves as being socially popular.

As Pearson (2009) highlights, Facebook users utilise and manipulate these tools and techniques afforded by Facebook's architecture and design to construct, convey and continuously revise their self-presentation, creating a "consensual social hallucination" (Pearson, 2009, para 8). In addition, they can replicate the virtual self they have presented on Facebook across multiple SNS platforms, further reinforcing and linking themselves back to their chosen performed, idealistic identity.

According to Jan, Ahmad, and Soomro (2017, p. 336), approximately 88% of Facebook users made social comparisons on Facebook, with 98% of those comparisons being upward social comparisons. Likewise, Vogel et al. (2014) found that people on average tend to make more upward than downward social comparisons on Facebook. Upward social comparisons can be defined as the comparison an individual makes between themselves and those they perceive as being superior to them and possessing positive attributes, while downward social comparisons can be defined as the comparison an individual makes between themselves and those they perceive as being inferior to them and possessing negative attributes (Jan et al., 2017). Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tong (as cited in Jan et al., 2017, p. 336) argued the majority of Facebook users utilised the platform to find out what is happening in other people's lives, and judge other users based on the cues they present on their profile pages. Moreover, Vogel et al. (2014) argue that one of the reasons individuals use SNS – whether consciously or unconsciously – is to provide themselves with a basis upon which to make social comparisons when self-evaluating themselves. As Vogel et al. (2014) highlight, SNS such as Facebook provide the perfect platform for individuals to create seemingly flawless, idealistic self-presentations, enabling them to selectively post content and allow or delete content from other users to present themselves in a way which is consistent with their ideals and how they wish to be perceived, rather than in a way which is consistent with reality. This is in contrast to the offline space, where individuals are not afforded the luxury of asynchronous time, disembodiment, or 'delete' buttons to craft their identities in such a way. As Chen and Lee (2013) highlight,

those who use Facebook frequently are generally more exposed to the idealistic, positive self-presentations of other users. Consequently, they found frequent Facebook interaction is linked to psychological distress by causing increased “communication overload”, feelings of “relative deprivation”, and reduced self-esteem (Chen & Lee, 2013, p. 728). Similarly, Jan et al. (2017) found that an increase in time spent on Facebook was directly linked to a decrease in users’ self-esteem.

It is believed that humans have an innate drive to compare themselves to others, which fulfills their affiliation and self-evaluation needs (Vogel et al., 2014). But while upward social comparisons can be beneficial in providing inspiration for self-improvement, in most cases, it causes those making the comparisons to feel inadequate, “not good enough”, and as though others’ lives are happier than theirs (Chou & Edge, 2012; Vogel et al., 2014). According to Festinger (as cited in Jan et al., 2017, p. 331-332), SNS users tend to make social comparisons based on factors including perceived wealth, beauty, popularity and social class. With many Facebook users portraying idealistic self-presentations based upon these and other social factors, this has led to frequent Facebook users believing other users – especially those they do not know well offline – are living happier and more fulfilling lives than themselves. Indeed, consistent with previous research findings, Feinstein, Hershenberg, Bhatia, Latack, Meuwly, and Davila (2013, p. 167) found that social comparisons on Facebook were linked to depressive symptoms. Similarly, Vogel et al. (2014) highlight previous studies showing high-frequency Facebook usage is linked to an increase in depression and a decrease in well-being.

For humans, self-esteem serves as a fundamental method of self-evaluation. As Vogel et al. (2014) highlight, self-esteem is associated with an individual’s feelings of self-worthiness and competence, and, as such, also serves to position individuals in terms of their perceived social acceptance and to provide meaning to their lives. As well as being a stable state that develops over time, self-esteem is also a fluid state, changing

according to day-to-day situations and contexts (Vogel et al., 2014). With frequent, or even temporary exposure to cues from predominately idealistic self-presentations on Facebook – with its over 1.5 billion daily active users worldwide (Facebook, 2018) – it can be argued that these saturated, idealistic self-presentations can trigger upward social comparisons in both individuals with typically low and high self-esteem, consequently damaging their self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014).

There is a clear fundamental flaw with making upward social comparisons on Facebook – individuals are comparing their realistic offline selves to the idealised online selves of others (Vogel et al., 2014). It is no surprise, then, that Vogel et al. (2014) found those exposed to upward social comparisons reported greater discrepancies between their real and their ideal selves and poorer self-esteem than when they were exposed to downward social comparisons. In addition, other flaws with making upward social comparisons on Facebook include what Chou and Edge (2012, p. 117) describe as the “availability heuristic” and “correspondence bias”. When making social comparisons, Facebook users tend to judge others based on examples they can easily recall (the availability heuristic), especially when their ‘Friends’ network is extensive and time-consuming to manage. Since Facebook users tend to present themselves in an idealistic light, those users making social comparisons are generally exposed to a seemingly endless stream of positive information, comments and images from their ‘Friends’ via their Facebook News Feed. With Facebook’s News Feed providing such quick access to and such easily-digestible pieces of idealistic content from users’ profile pages, it is easy for Facebook users to recall this idealistic content when forming an impression of others, often leading them to assume that others are living happier lives than themselves (Chou & Edge, 2012). Additionally, correspondence bias refers to the tendency of individuals to assume that the words and actions of others are reflective of their personality, rather than subject to their situation (Chou & Edge, 2012). For example, when Facebook users post photos depicting themselves as happy, those viewing the images tend to conclude that the person is inherently happy, without taking

into consideration the situational factors that made them appear happy in the photos. Combined, the availability heuristic and correspondence bias serve to give Facebook users – especially frequent users and those with many ‘Friends’ they do not know well personally offline (weak ties) – the impression that others are leading happier, more fulfilling lives than themselves, consequently damaging their self-esteem. Indeed, Chou & Edge (2012, p. 117) found that those who have been Facebook users for longer agreed more with the idea that others were happier and less with the idea that “life is fair”, while those who spent more time on Facebook each week and included more weak ties within their Facebook ‘Friends’ network also agreed more with the idea that others were happier and had better lives than themselves.

Evidently, idealistic self-presentations on Facebook – with their prevalence, pervasiveness, ease of access and flawed inconsistency with reality – risk damaging self-esteem by portraying and disseminating unrealistic personas, ideals and lifestyles and triggering upward social comparisons.

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