

Face(book) to Face(book)

Constructing the Self via Facebook Profile
Pictures and Cover Photos

By Katerina Tagkalou

(4027965)

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Utrecht University
New Media & Digital Culture
Supervisor: Ann-Sophie Lehmann
Second Reader: Teresa de la Hera
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1. INTRODUCTION

As a medium, or rather *the* medium of our time, the Web has brought with it new examinations of identity. Indeed, researchers and writers have been particularly intrigued in investigating how self-expression may change as it moves through a telephone line or fiber-optic cable. This should come as no surprise. Media have long been conceptualized as extensions of ourselves, as tools available at our disposal not only to present information but also to construct and describe our identities, tools that are social and co-constructed (McLuhan, 1964). Without a doubt, a sense of self is conveyed differently in a telephone conversation, a hand-written letter, a printed book, a televised broadcast or a face-to-face encounter. Ever since the online realm came into play, new avenues for self-presentation have surfaced; early Internet inhabitants were crafting versions of themselves on bulletin boards, chat rooms, MUDs, text-based adventure games and personal websites. These online spaces were regarded as sites where users could experiment with aspects of their identity as they could devise ways to represent themselves freed from the constraints of their physical bodies (i.e. Turkle, 1995; Nakamura, 1995). Back then, the “virtual” or “online” sphere was viewed and experienced as revolutionary and entirely separate from the real life.

During the past decade we have witnessed the rise of social networking sites (SNSs) along with the wave of what has been labeled as the Web 2.0 movement, a movement which revolves around the idea that individuals can finally engage into the active creation of content through “new participatory architectures of the Web” (O’ Reilly, 2005). These virtual settings allow participants to strategically construct custom (public or semi-public) profile pages, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Users of these sites see a certain level of self-presentation and self-disclosure as a requirement of participation. They carefully provide information about themselves via a variety of modes of communication, ranging from using plain text to report personal information, update status, and write comments on friend’s profile pages, to sharing a prolific amount of images.

After all, why have a profile if you are not willing to say enough about who you are?

SNSs have radically changed the way people connect to each other with participants not primarily using these sites for networking or to meet new people, but more often to communicate with those already in their extended social network, leading researchers to suggest that SNSs serve as a bridge between online and offline connections (i.e. boyd & Ellison, 2007; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2009). Thus, SNSs clearly do not encourage anonymity as opposed to early online spaces and this heavily affects the way people choose to make claims about themselves.

With 1.35 billion monthly active users as of September 30, 2014,¹ Facebook is, without a doubt, the leading social networking site of our time. Created in 2004, it first limited its user base to college students but soon opened its site to the general public achieving an overall growth in its usage by all demographics of the population. In the Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, Facebook explicitly demands from its users to create faithful profiles of their real selves and provide accurate and up-to-date information as a prerequisite for participation (Facebook, 2013). This enforcement of the real self represents a new iteration of computer mediated communication, one that blends elements of face-to-face interaction and the virtual world, and signifies the blurring of longstanding boundaries between the online and offline space. Indeed, Facebook has been conceptualized as a virtual “third place,” that is a place outside of home and office where people manage and manoeuvre their daily social lives (Rao, 2008).

Moving on to the design of the platform, it is apparent that the most prominent characteristic of Facebook is its highly visual environment. Among SNSs, Facebook is now the biggest and fastest growing photo-sharing site, with a daily uploading rate of over 219 million photos (Eftekhari et al., 2014: 162). Although posting photographs is a very important feature of Facebook, what arguably acts as the most pointed attempt of visual self-presentation is the profile image. In essence, this image “stands in” for the user's body in this online environment along with the cover photo which adorns the background of the profile page. In combination, profile and cover photo serve many users to present

¹Statistics retrieved from Facebook's newsroom: <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>

themselves in person as well as expressing, literally, a background for their personality. The symbolic significance of this combination is apparent from the changes of profile and cover pictures to indicate changes in personal life. For instance, very often, when someone is getting married, they choose photos from the wedding as profile and cover images.

Notwithstanding the extremely rich iconography of the self that Facebook presents in the combination of just two pictures, little of the research into SNSs has examined the posted photographs beyond acknowledging them as elements of self-presentation. Most studies have looked at Facebook and other SNSs profile pages as a single text including both visual and textual elements. From this expanding body of research, relatively little literature is specifically geared towards profile pictures and virtually no study has considered the self-presentational properties of the cover photos, a novel feature introduced by Facebook in 2011. It is important to keep in mind that Facebook is not finished, but changes over time. Facebook can be thought of as an “evolving medium” since the way it is used evolves, partially due to technical changes, but also due to users and their constant renegotiation of usage practices (Stenros et al., 2011: 154). Taking into consideration the ubiquity of Facebook in the daily routines of billions of users and its highly visual environment, and in an effort to advance the line of online self-presentation research, this thesis aspires to consider the following research question: How is identity formation afforded by the interplay of Facebook profile and cover photos? More precisely, how do the specific design affordances of Facebook with regard to profile and cover photos shape and influence the self-presentation strategies available for the users, how do users navigate and negotiate with these affordances when selecting their profile and cover photos and how do they understand and interpret their agency in creating a desirable impression to others?

Thus, the goal of the thesis is threefold: For one thing, it aspires to consider in what ways Facebook design affords the visual presentation of identity focusing on the use of profile and cover images. Second, it intends to look into the content of these images and reveal what aspects Facebook users choose to portray in them, all affordances considered. Last, it aims to illuminate the side of the users by examining their interpretations of their activities in the selection of photos with the use of an open-ended questionnaire. The objective is

to develop a multifaceted point of view on the role of Facebook profile pictures and cover photos in online self-presentation and identity formation.

1.1 Research Outline

In order to answer these questions, I approach my research as follows: first, I present the findings of my literature review which consist of a descriptive account of the academic current state of affairs with regards to the use of photographs as a means of self-presentation in the context of SNSs and similar online settings, such as personal home pages and online dating sites.

In the next chapter I present the theoretical approach I have chosen as a frame of reference. Therefore I first provide a detailed introduction to Erving Goffman's impression management framework as developed in his influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Even though Goffman's book long predates the digital era and focuses solely on micro-level face-to-face interaction, his terms, metaphors and vocabulary prove to be useful in the context of SNSs, and Facebook in particular, as will become apparent in the literature review. However, there are certain characteristics of impression management that are profoundly different when social interactions are carried out online rather than offline. These characteristics are pointed to and analyzed. In the last part of my theoretical approach I focus on visual self-presentation. For that matter, I recount how the changing landscape of photographic practices, with the transition to the digital, is affecting the role of personal photography in communication and the shaping of identity.

In the fourth chapter, I present the methods used for this study. As mentioned earlier, the aim of the thesis is to consider the role of Facebook profile pictures and cover photos in the online presentation of identity in three levels: how Facebook as a platform affords the visual presentation of self, how users utilize these affordances when selecting their images and how the users themselves describe their activities. Each of these levels is addressed using a different method. First, I carry out a material object analysis of Facebook's interface to discern the possibilities of visual self-presentation the platform provides and the subtle ways it channels user activities by stimulating certain

actions and averting others (van den Boomen & Lehmann, 2013: 9). Second, I look into the profile pictures and cover photos of ten Facebook profiles taken from my own group of Facebook friends guiding my analysis and going through visual patterns with the aid of the sociovidistic framework, a framework for observation and description of home mode forms of communication, as developed by visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen (1975). Participants, known to me prior to the study, have been chosen on the basis of the following criteria: (a) they are 25-36 years of age. So far, research on online self-presentation in SNSs has focused on adolescents and college-age students, however, Facebook nowadays appeals to all demographics. By including users of older age I aspire to expand existing research on how identity is managed in the context of SNSs. (b) All Facebook users selected have been members of the platform at least since 2008. Hence, they are experienced and immersed in the site's culture. (c) They are active on Facebook in the sense of posting content frequently. (d) They all belong to distinct social spheres and come from different backgrounds; some working, others being master students, others PhD candidates. This was a conscious decision I made for reasons of diversity. (e) In order to achieve male/female balance, five participants are men and five women. The third method I use for this study is an open-ended questionnaire, where I ask these ten participants to describe and interpret themselves their choices of images (Brennen, 2013: 28).

In the fifth chapter I lay out my analysis and reflect on my findings, summarizing the most important ones. I divide my analysis into three sub-chapters, following the three distinct methods employed.

A broader discussion of my findings and analyses will be presented in the final chapter. This discussion ties my results back to my initial research question and the theoretical framework presented in the third chapter.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter the objective is to provide a field overview, a description of the academic current state of affairs with regards to the use of photographs as a means of self-presentation in the context of SNSs and similar online settings.

At this point, it is useful to underline that identity and community are not only relevant to SNSs and the like but have long presented focal concepts of interest for new media researchers. MIT social studies professor Sherry Turkle, one of the pioneers in this area, has explored the early interplay between computers and society, conceptualizing the personal computer not as a mere tool that serves an instrumental function but rather as an evocative object which profoundly affects our awareness of ourselves (1984: 19). A decade later, Turkle contemplated on how the Internet, an emerging trend at the time, challenges our notions of sexuality, community and, ultimately, identity by linking millions of people in new spaces (1995: 9). Back then, the anonymous and textual nature of cyberspace allegedly allowed people to overcome “identity fixes” such as age, gender, looks and race, to uncouple their body from their subject position and to view their identities as inherently fluid and multiple, “as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched” (ibid: 180).

However, the idea of the incognito playground of cyberspace was soon refuted as it became less textual and more visual. Anthropologist of computing Eleanor Wynn and professor of emerging media James E. Katz, in their qualitative research on personal home pages, see the “virtualness” and alleged anonymity of Internet as illusory and therefore unable to support a plausibly disembodied, fragmented “self” overtime (1997: 297). Home page authors, they argue, are not merely sharing information with others, they are also engaged in establishing an integrated, cohesive sense of self on virtual terrain, that is to “make a personal statement of identity, and show in a stable, replicable way what the individual stands for and what is deemed important” (ibid.: 318). This sense of self is conveyed not only via text but also via audiovisual components in an effort to communicate to potential mass audiences (Papacharissi, 2002: 346). The use of personal photographs is highlighted as a distinctive feature of online self-presentation: “Who-I-am tends to be expressed in a photograph” (Wynn and Katz, 1997: 320), among other things. Wynn and Katz, who interpreted the use of

photos in several personal home pages they reviewed, were among the first to draw attention to the simultaneously public and private nature of these less anonymous online spaces. In other words, Web authors were found to disclose private information (including personal photos), to a limitless, random audience. Communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi, in her study on the utility of personal home pages, argues that those who used their Web pages as a means to communicate with friends and family viewed their pages primarily as extended photo albums aiming at updating other family members and friends on family activities (2002: 360).

Insights into visual self-presentation increased through studies that examined online dating sites, a phenomenon that first emerged in 1995.² The online dating arena differs significantly from other online settings due to the anticipation of subsequent face-to-face encounters inherent in this context (Ellison et al., 2006: 416). Dating sites are what sociologists Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck and Jason Martin call “nonymous” (opposite of “anonymous”) online spaces in which people develop “anchored relationships,” that is relationships that exist both online and offline (2008: 1818). On these sites participants are required to construct a profile where they can upload photographs and videos of themselves and write a description of who they are. Even though the inclusion of a profile photo is not a prerequisite for participation, users, especially women, typically opted to have one, many selecting the most flattering photo they could find, even going as far as having a glamour shot (Whitty, 2008: 1713). In her study based on the qualitative analysis of 60 interviews of online dating users, psychologist and professor of contemporary media Monica Whitty revealed that the need for people to present a physically attractive image of themselves was more important than any other characteristic (ibid.: 1714). Communication scholar Nicole Ellison et al., after conducting 32 telephone interviews and analyzing data qualitatively, found out that dating site users relied on photographs to convey visual objective evidence not only to communicate what they looked like but also to indicate the qualities they felt were important (2006: 430). As put by the authors, the use of photographs “served to warrant or support claims made in textual descriptions”

²Article on Wired about the first online dating sites:
<http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/3.09/scans.html?pg=7>

(ibid.). Furthermore, people appeared very conscious of their selection of photos, and even the different poses they were portraying on them were formed according to the “set of rules” which they also used to assess the photos of others (ibid.). It has been confirmed that participants are eager to experiment with what photos and descriptions of themselves would more successfully attract others to their profiles (Whitty, 2008: 1715). Although they would present an enhanced vision of self, they simultaneously tried to maintain enough accuracy due to the anticipation of a face to face exchange (Ellison et al., 2006:429), that is to “stretch the truth a bit” (Yurchisin et al., 2005: 742) while remaining quite “realistic and honest” (Ellison et al., 2006: 429).

SNSs are online, nonymous environments significantly different from dating sites in that the users are attempting to present an identity that appeals to both genders as the goal is more often friendship than mate seeking (Strano, 2008). Furthermore, identities are usually first grounded in offline relationships and then move to the online realm while in dating sites we observe the opposite. However, research shows that these online spaces have a lot in common. For one thing, SNSs users, too, value physical attractiveness as the most salient visual cue and choose to post self-promoting photos that accentuate their good looks (Strano, 2008; Siibak 2009; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Also, as in dating sites, female users share more photos, are tagged more often than men and are more likely to untag (remove their name from another member's photograph on which the member had added their name) photos due to displeasure with their appearance in them (Pempek et al., 2009: 233). Social media theoretician specialized in identity formation danah boyd and computer scientist Jeffrey Heer having conducted an ethnographic research to qualitatively analyze 200 Friendster profiles, argue that, although primarily identity markers and conversation starters, photos themselves have conversational properties (2006). In other words, photos do not solely prompt a dialogue in the form of comments but also convey various information: for instance, following any spectacular event, it is common to see a shift in photos whereby everyone who attended uses a photo from that event to signal participation, friendship structure to outsiders and an expression of appreciation to friends (ibid.) When looking into 63 Facebook profiles of college students, Zhao et al. distinguish between implicit (visual) and explicit (verbal) identity

claims (2008: 1824). Users were more likely to showcase themselves implicitly, that is through photos which they themselves would post or which other users would post on their “wall,” in other words they were found to prefer to “show” rather than “tell” in order to generate desired impressions (ibid.: 1825). Undergraduate students, who participated in a study carried out in the field of psychology, claimed that photos helped them express who they are to other Facebook users (Pempek et al., 2009: 233). In general, people seem to treat their online images as expressions of their viewpoint and aesthetics (Van House, 2011: 131). A study by social psychologist Sonia Livingstone which included SNSs users 13 to 16 years old revealed that younger teenagers were more fond of creating a highly decorated, stylistically elaborate identity whilst older ones opted for a plain aesthetic (2008).

Directly applicable to my present study are findings concerning the use of profile pictures. Facebook users appeared to favor group pictures instead of single-person ones, which would seem a more rational choice for one’s profile photo, indicative of an effort to construct a group-oriented identity (Zhao et al., 2008: 1827). Thus, the visual self can be thought of as the “self as social actor” (ibid.: 1825). Communication studies scholar Michele Strano, too, while examining users’ interpretations of their Facebook profile photos in an open-ended qualitative survey answered by 427 respondents from 18 to over 60 years of age, discerns that group identity is emphasized (2008). Psychology professor Manago et al., after interviewing 23 undergraduate students, argue that emerging adults who use MySpace see their profile images as a means to objectify possible identities, namely to experiment with their visual self-presentations, displaying them to a new kind of audience (2008: 454). Indeed, studies confirm that when it comes to SNSs, there is significant online lurking and that users are eager to browse friends’ profiles and have their profiles examined as well (Pempek et al., 2009: 237). Facebook to them is “voyeuristic” (ibid.: 235). The social uses of photographs (i.e. sharing, tagging) may also play an important role in ‘social connection’ and highlight a public communication style (Joinson, 2008: 1031; Pempek et al., 2009: 237).

Clearly, the issue of online visual self-presentation has attracted the attention of researchers from diverse disciplines: media studies, sociology, psychology. All research on nonymous online spaces, as recounted above, is

qualitative, with the exception of studies by Pempek et al. (2009) and Strano (2008), which are both qualitative and quantitative. Although in the case of personal home pages and dating sites the sample under scrutiny included individuals of older age, the great majority of studies on SNSs focused on the visual self-presentational practices of adolescents and emerging adults. Since the present study seeks to extend the existing research on visual self-presentation in nonymous settings, and Facebook in particular, this detailed account of previous findings was fruitful: for one thing, the limited literature on profile pictures in SNSs and the non-existent reference to cover photos, a Facebook novelty introduced in 2011, clearly demonstrates how necessary it is to address this dearth of research. Second, the fact that existing literature on SNSs has mostly considered the visual claims made by college-aged users, it is important to investigate a sample consisting of older users. Last, it can be postulated that even small-scale qualitative studies (i.e.: Livingstone, 2008), contribute to a cumulative picture of the phenomenon of online self-presentation and, thus, it seems useful to follow a similar approach in the present study.

A common thread running through the aforementioned research papers is that people in nonymous online settings, and SNSs in particular, would consciously and strategically select photographs in an effort to project an enhanced sense of self. This is in line with early theories about self-presentation as developed by sociologist Erving Goffman. Therefore, in the following, I will proceed with a detailed account of Goffman's impression management framework, which has served as a source of influence to virtually all authors whose work was just cited. Since this framework was developed to study how people present themselves while in the physical presence of others, I will also address the issues arising when impression management is conducted online. Later in the thesis (see chapter 6), I will return to Goffman's framework to explain how it can be adapted to visual online self-presentation in particular. To complement my theoretical approach, I will draw on literature about personal photography to grasp how practices and meanings of image making have shifted with the transition to digital and in what ways digital personal photography has come to primarily constitute a tool for an individual's identity formation.

3. THEORETICAL APPROACH: From Goffman to the presentation of self in the age of Facebook

3.1 Presenting the Self

3.1.1 Erving Goffman's impression management framework

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Erving Goffman develops his dramaturgical framework as an analogy that studies social interactions as though they are stage productions. He conceptualizes people as actors, whose performance varies based on social context, particularly in terms of who they are performing for (the audience). People, he argues, work to establish and maintain favorable impressions believable to their audiences. In turn, members of the audience can either endorse performances or dismiss the actor's apparent incompetence. Because of this ability to receive and process feedback, which demonstrates the individuals' reflexive understanding of a social situation, it can be inferred that it is usually in an individual's best interest to present an "idealized" version of their role that fits their understanding of the audiences' expectations rather than act as they do when not in public (Goffman, 1959: 35). All the efforts a person makes, either consciously or unconsciously, to convey a coherent and meaningful image and, consequently, to influence the audience's belief in their performance (self-presentation) are defined as "impression management."

This notion of the "idealized" version of self is distilled in theories formulated decades later. According to social psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986), a person's conception of himself or herself can be distinguished by two categories: the now selves, which describe the self as it presently is perceived by the individual, and the possible selves, which are images of the self that have not yet been realized but that are hoped for or feared (1986: 957). Possible selves serve to guide individuals' behavior as they attempt to establish their hoped-for possible selves, that is their socially desirable identities (ibid.: 961). A similar approach is that of psychologist Tory Higgins (1987). He discerns three types of self-domains: (1) the actual self, which is one's

representation of the attributes that are believed (by oneself or another) to be possessed by an individual; (2) the ideal self, which is one's representation of the attributes that someone (either oneself or another) would like one to possess; and (3) the ought self, which refers to the attributes that someone (oneself or another) believes one should possess (Higgins, 1987: 320-321). One's own perspective on the actual-self can also be viewed as the self-concept, while the ideal self and the ought self, like possible selves, provide important goals, standards, or self-guides for self-regulation (Siibak, 2009). These two theories demonstrate that it is through impression management that individuals can actualize the identities they hope to establish.

The information people use to manage their impressions can be distinguished in two forms described by Goffman as “expressions given” and “expressions given off” (1959: 2). The first of these are expressed in “verbal symbols or their substitutes” (ibid.: 2) and are consciously and intentionally articulated in the understanding that the audience will accurately comprehend the actor's meaning. Conversely, the expressions individuals give off are largely non-verbal, presumably unintentional and, therefore, beyond their control and mastery (ibid.: 4). During a performance, both of these types of information are constantly being “given” and “given off.” Audience members receive all information by the performer and scrutinize it to assess the truthfulness of the actor's claims. The performer may infer from the audience's reaction whether their performance is well received and alter it accordingly to achieve the desired impression.

Another noteworthy concept is that of the “front” which helps to understand how people convey symbolic information about themselves. As Goffman puts it, fronts are “that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (1959: 22). They are the totality of the “expressive equipment” an actor employs while in the presence of an audience and is comprised by standard parts (ibid.). First, there is the setting which involves furniture, décor and other background items that supply the “scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out” (ibid.) and is associated with certain spatial location. Second, there is what Goffman names “personal front,” which refers to items of expressive equipment that intimately pertain to

performers and that they follow them wherever they go (ibid.: 23-24). The personal front can subsequently be divided into two categories; on the one hand, “appearance” refers to the stimuli that are used to convey the performer’s social statuses and is understood as a fairly changeless condition that signifies who we are (ibid.). On the other hand, “manner” consists of those aspects of communication that reveal to the audience the type of interaction roles performers expect to play in a certain situation, put differently, manner is how we want to be perceived of in a particular situation (ibid.). Thus, fronts provide observers information in the form of recognizable, standardized mannerisms, appearances, and settings and allow them to fill in information that might not be explicitly given during a performance.

Last, Goffman observes that performances take place on two regions: the “front stage,” which is the place where a performance is actually given, and the “backstage,” where actors can try out and rehearse the performances that they might or might not enact in the presence of an audience (1959: 112). Thus, it is in the front region where identities are produced through the ceaseless interplay between self-presentation (which includes both expressions given and expressions given off) and observers’ evaluation.

3.1.2 Managing impressions online

So far I have illustrated key aspects of Goffman’s dramaturgical and impression management framework. Even though Goffman’s aim was to investigate how individuals present themselves during periods of co-location as well as the particular roles they occupy while in the physical presence of others, the concepts he introduced have proved to be equally influential in the context of online self-presentations. Indeed, researchers have considered and applied his theory claiming that although depth and richness of self-presentation might not seem immediately apparent online that nonetheless “the problem of establishing and maintaining an acceptable self remains, and there is a range of expressive resources available for this end” (Miller qtd in: Whitty, 2008: 1710). Furthermore, Goffman is considered one of the first theorists to suggest that identities are not linked to an inherent, fixed subject position but are strategically shaped and re-

shaped according to the numerous social encounters individuals face throughout their lives. Similarly, webpages in general and SNSs in particular “are a media form which is never entirely finished, just as identity composition is a continuous process – both are constantly ‘under construction’” (Kennedy, 2006: 869).

However, when social interactions are carried out online, there are certain characteristics that are profoundly different than in face-to-face communication. In his hyperpersonal communication model, communication professor Joseph Walther (1996) posits that affordances of the Internet allow users to enhance and strategically shape their self-presentations online due to limited cues and the asynchronous nature of computer mediated communication (CMC). Not only is CMC editable, the user possesses unlimited time for editing while in physical isolation from the receiver of the information, masking involuntary cues (Walther, 2007: 2541). Thus, online impression management is more controllable and fluid. As put by Papacharissi “[i]n cyberspace it is easier to bridge the potential disparity between the expressions given and the expressions given off,” due to the absence of nonverbal elements (2002: 645). However, the ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005) paradigm of the mid-2000s, with its development of platforms and services specifically designed for the networked sharing of user-created content, the cues, albeit still limited when compared to face to face interaction, have ceased to be solely verbal. For Zhao et al., photographs are implicit expressions given off, and, as argued in the previous sub-chapter, users are more likely to present themselves implicitly (2008: 1825), thus risk for expressions to be given off.

To be sure, impression management in SNSs is also challenging. For one thing, the reduction of social cues means that performers on the one hand cannot use a wide range of expressions (both given and given off) to convey information about themselves and the audience, on the other hand, does not receive enough input to assess the truthfulness and sincerity of the performers’ claims (Rui & Stefanone, 2013: 111). Also, due to the asynchronous nature of CMC in terms of information exchange, the performer does not receive the instant feedback from his audience and, thus, is unable to adjust on time his performance accordingly (ibid.). Furthermore, in SNSs, users are faced with the multiple audience challenge (ibid.). As opposed to face-to-face encounters, where performers can target their self-presentation at specific audience

members and achieve desirable impressions, SNSs do not provide this opportunity. Performers have a vast, often heterogeneous audience before which they have to use one single front at a time. Last, information about the presenter is not entirely self-provided (ibid.). This is not only the case when one tags people in a shared photograph or posts something in one's wall. Even in the case of profile pictures and cover photos, which users themselves generate, select and upload, comments made by others can affect impression management.

Since this thesis aspires to consider the visual self-presentation of Facebook users via their profile and cover photos, and because the research on impression management on SNSs has not yet made use of research specifically geared to photographic representations of the self, i.e. self-portraiture, in the remainder of the chapter I find it useful to focus on the role of digital personal photography in the shaping of identity in contexts other than SNSs.

3.2 Digital personal photography as a tool for self-presentation

Personal photography,³ that which is made by non-professionals for themselves and their friends and intimates (Van House, 2011: 125), begins, arguably, with the introduction of the Kodak hand camera in 1888, making the practice of photography accessible to the mass market (Jenkins, 1975: 12–14). This is why this larger social practice is referred to as the “Kodak culture,” “whatever it is that one has to learn, know, or do in order to participate appropriately in what has been outlined as the home mode of pictorial communication” (Chalfen, 1987: 10). Visual anthropologist Nancy Van House et al. (2005) discern four social uses for photography, namely constructing personal and group memory, creating and maintaining social relationships, self-presentation, and self-expression, which, in recent years, are profoundly affected by the changes associated with digital image-making and networking. To be able to grasp what personal photography has come to be, it is therefore crucial to look into the profound shifts in the balance between these various social uses.

³ According to Van Dijck, the term “personal photography” is preferred over commonly used terms such as “amateur photography” or “family photography” as the word “personal” distinguishes it from professional photography without the connotation of “amateurish” in relation to camera use and without presupposing the presence of a familial context (2008: 72).

For one thing, as media scholar José Van Dijck puts it, the individual has gradually become the nucleus of pictorial life and, nowadays, self-presentation rather than family representation constitutes the major function of photographs (2008:60). Barbara Harrison's ethnographic study points to a significant shift from personal photography being primarily an act of memory towards pictures as a form of identity formation (2002: 107). Images are still seen as memories made durable (Van House, 2011: 130) but are shared less in the context of family and home and more in peer-group environments functioning as part of conversation or to confirm social bonds (Van Dijck, 2008: 61).

Indeed, relationships are central to personal photography whose evidentiary force provides proof of experiences and bonds for ourselves and for others (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011: 254). After all, photographs are "relational objects [...] occupying the spaces between people and people, and people and things" (Edwards qtd in: Van House, 2011: 130). With the transition to digital, subjects being deemed photo-worthy have expanded to include, apart from special events, the everyday (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011: 254). This change is reflected in the growing popularity of digital tools both in terms of hardware and software. Digital cameras and especially camera-phones support spontaneous, opportunistic image-making and experimentation (Van House, 2011: 127) not only because they become the "camera that is always with you" but also because they are discreet and offer the freedom to just shoot (Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012: 216). In fact, the camera-phone, or, more colloquially, the smartphone, is considered the perfect "urban image device" due to its mobility and discretion along with the processing capabilities and almost real-time possibility of showing and sharing the pictures (ibid.). The endless potential of the smartphone has lead theorists to affirm that "we are witnessing a generalized fifth moment in photography, that of complete mobility, ubiquity, and connection" (ibid.: 217). Platforms, too, play a crucial role, that is SNSs, photoblogs, image hosting websites like Flickr and Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat as well as visual software that enables the quick correction of flaws or filters and makes it possible to readily change the appearance of photographic images, has become integrated with most camera software (Keep, 2014: 21). In fact, photographs partake of all the ways that we use computer-based media, from social networking to immediate communication (Van House, 2011: 128). In this

context, as put eloquently by Van Dijck, “[p]ictures become more like spoken language as photographs are turning into the new currency for social interaction” as “[p]ixelated images, like spoken words, circulate between individuals and groups to establish and reconfirm bonds” (2008: 62). Due to their abundance, they are temporary reminders and gain value as moments (ibid.). The emergence of a platform like Snapchat, an impermanent photo messaging application, in September 2011 confirms this idea (Colao, 2012).

The self-presentational use of personal photography was fairly acknowledged even prior to the transition to digital (Van Dijck, 2008: 63). After all, going back to Goffman, “[p]eople give a ‘performance’ when they allow themselves to be photographed, in the sense that they make allowance for a public that will ultimately see the photograph” (Boerdam & Martinius qtd in: Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011: 255). However, digital cameras and smartphones provide more access to the imaging process both to the photographer and the subject who is posing, allowing them to preview the photo seconds after it is taken and, subsequently, to decide either to store it or delete it (Van Dijck, 2008: 66). The subject’s evaluation of his or her self-image may influence the next pose (ibid.). Next, the subject re-evaluates the photos taken and, at times, uses photo-paint software to manipulate and retouch these self-images, from cropping to adjusting colors to using filters and so on (ibid.). Nowadays, we are witnessing an explosive popularity in self-documentation, where the subject becomes the photographer and vice versa. The word “selfie” became the Oxford Dictionaries’ neologism of the year 2013 and is defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.”⁴ These photographic self-portraits offer ultimate control over one’s image, allowing one to present oneself to others in a mediated way (Tifentale, 2013: 9). Psychology professor Mark R. Leary argues that “[t]hrough the clothes one wears, one’s expression, staging of the physical setting, and the style of the photo, people can convey a particular public image of themselves, presumably one that they think will garner social rewards.”⁵ The use of photographs as a means of self-presentation in the context

⁴Definition retrieved online from: <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/>

⁵Scholarly reflections on the selfie retrieved from: <http://blog.oup.com/2013/11/scholarly-reflections-on-the-selfie-woty-2013/>

of SNSs has been discussed elaborately in the literature review chapter but I would like to highlight once again that such networked environments blend private and public boundaries and, thus, photographs can traverse multiple audiences (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011: 256) making private messages public and ownership fluid (Van House, 2011: 132).

Finally, photography has always been considered a fine art, but not so much in the context of personal photography (Van House, 2011: 131).⁶ However, the digital tools mentioned earlier (both hardware and software) have made image-making less sophisticated for everyday users who are encouraged to see the world as a field of potential images (ibid.). Gómez Cruz and Meyer quote one of their interviewees who states: “there are no more Cartier-Bressons, we all are Cartier-Bressons now!” (2012: 216).

In this sub-chapter I have delineated how practices and meanings of image-making have shifted with the transition to digital; personal photographs have become more effective as objects of communication and self-presentation than of memory, more public and temporary, less private and durable. Most importantly, people express their identity by taking, storing, processing and sharing photographs, as interactive producers and consumers of culture.

⁶To be sure, there are artists who use the language of personal photography extensively. A notable example is that of American photographer Nan Goldin (Loewenberg, 1999: 400). The point made here is that easy-to-use digital cameras/smartphones as well as editing software make it effortless and inexpensive for users to hone their artistic photographic skills and express themselves through image-making.

4. METHODS

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methodology I use for this study. Returning to my research question (“How is identity formation afforded by the interplay of Facebook profile and cover photos?”) I delineate the three distinct aspects that pertain to it. First, “how do the specific design affordances of Facebook with regard to profile and cover photos shape and influence the self-presentation strategies available for the users?” (Q1); second, “how do users navigate and negotiate with these affordances when selecting their profile and cover photos” (Q2); third, “how do they understand and interpret their agency in creating a desirable impression to others” (Q3). Each of these aspects will be considered using a different method. I strongly believe that there is a need to employ multiple methods within the same study so that the different facets of visual online self-presentation can be examined in different ways. The choice of each method will be justified and explicated in the following.

4.1 Facebook as a material object

Drawing on danah boyd’s influential article “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics” (2011), I approach Facebook as a networked public. Social network sites in general, and thus Facebook, are publics because of the ways in which they connect people en masse and because of the space they provide for interactions and information, and networked publics because of the ways in which networked technologies shape and configure them (boyd, 2011: 45). In this way, the term “networked public” works as a useful conceptual tool since it signifies simultaneously a space and a collection of people. According to boyd, the ways in which technology structures networked publics “introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments” (2011: 39). The role of affordances is duly acknowledged. But what does “affordance” really mean?

The concept of affordances was first introduced by the psychologist J.J. Gibson (1979) as a way to understand what an object can afford, that is, “what the object is good for.” The identification of affordances can be used to look into what might drive an individual to adopt and make use of an object. The notion of

affordances was later appropriated by Donald Norman (1999) in the context of human-machine interaction and design to describe the possible relationships between humans and technology and implications for technology use. Norman highlights the importance to differentiate between “real affordances” (an object’s intended uses) and “perceived affordances” (the affordances as perceived by the user) (ibid.). Professor of design William Gaver (1991) further stresses how affordances of technology enable a direct link between perception and action, and points to affordance as a key concept in explaining interaction between technology and the world around them. Perhaps more directly applicable to this study, communication scholars Jeffrey Treem and Paul Leonardi (2012) explain that the affordance approach helps underline what kinds of behavior social media afford, thereby creating an understanding of when, why and how social media are adopted.

Endorsing the significance of affordances, to address the first question (Q1), I will conduct what media scholars Marianne van den Boomen and Ann-Sophie Lehmann call a material object analysis (2014). This method is based on the premise that media objects can be the primary objects of study and through their description and analysis, researchers can grasp the heterogeneous implications of digital culture (2014: 9). I will, therefore, describe and analyze the Facebook interface as a concrete material thing, a technological artifact that is a hybrid assemblage of software and representations and track down its affordances with regard to profile pictures and cover photos. I will focus on the actual possibilities of visual self-presentation the platform provides and on the subtle ways it channels user activities by stimulating certain actions and averting others. For feasibility reasons, the analysis will be conducted on the level of user interface, understood as the symbolic handle that makes software accessible to the user by providing a point of access to its core data and structures (Cramer and Fuller, 2008: 149). Along the way, in order to guide my analysis, following the affordance approach, I will ask myself “what does each feature afford users to do and what not to do?”

To be sure, and in order to avoid a technologically deterministic viewpoint, it should be noted that Facebook’s affordances do not dictate user performance but rather configure the environment in a way that shapes user engagement. As put by boyd, “[u]nderstanding the properties, affordances, and

dynamics common to networked publics provides a valuable framework for working out the logic of social practices” (2011: 40). It is through the affordances offered that Facebook guides the cycle of visual impression management.

4.2 Looking into photos from a visual anthropological perspective

After having uncovered how Facebook design elements afford the visual self-presentation of users, it is important to examine how users themselves employ these affordances (O2). To this end, I choose to conduct a qualitative analysis of the profile pictures and cover photos of ten profiles selected from my own Facebook environment. To capture the richness of the images and the connecting and contrasting patterns depicted, I draw on visual anthropology and guide my research using Richard Chalfen's (1975) sociovidistic framework, a framework for observation and description of home mode forms of communication. Even though Chalfen articulated his introduction to the study of non-professional photography as visual communication almost four decades ago, and, thus, much prior to the transition to digital, his framework remains refreshingly current, useful and lucid. It is basically a 5x5 grid which contains events (planning, shooting: on-camera, shooting: behind-camera, editing, exhibiting) each of which should be examined through, or in conjunction with, a series of components (participants, settings, topics, message form, code) (Chalfen, 1975: 21-23). This study will focus on the exhibiting event, “which consists of any activity, behavior or performance in which a photographic or filmic image is shown and viewed in a public context” (ibid.: 22), to analyze Facebook profile and cover photos. The components will serve as a coding device to enable me to highlight the aspects that must be attended to in my analysis. They will also constitute the categories under which the results of the analysis will be presented. Therefore, I explain them in more detail: Participants involve anyone who participates in the shooting event, both people on and off camera, that is those who take pictures, appear in pictures and look at pictures (ibid.); Setting refers to when and where an event occurs (ibid.); Topic describes the content in terms of themes, subject matter and activities that are actually shown in the photograph (ibid.); Message form addresses the physical shape or

“kind” of photo (ibid.); Code describes the elements or units in terms of what one defines as a particular style as well as patterned social elements (ibid.: 23). From these components, the message form will not be considered further since all photographs under scrutiny are digital and posted on Facebook as profile and cover images. Also, I find it useful to refer to the code component as aesthetics and style, since code can have multiple meanings and, thus, lead to confusion.

These four categories (participants, setting, topic and aesthetics/style) closely connect to what Goffman has defined as “front,” the selective details that one presents in order to foster the desired impression alongside the unintentional details that are given off as part of the performance (see 3.1). As discussed earlier, these selective details include setting (scenery and stage props), appearance and manner. Thus, there is a clear correlation between Chalfen’s components and Goffman’s front. Also, the participant component was meant to be interpreted broadly including both people in the picture and those looking at it. Similarly, Goffman argues that, in order for a performance to take place, two parties must be present: the actor and the audience. And, since the actor regulates his or her performance according to the feedback received by the audience, I find it necessary to also analyze the comments of the Facebook profile and cover photos, as they might affect the user’s impression management strategies. This apparent similarity to Goffman’s impression management framework was yet another reason why Chalfen’s sociovidistic framework was chosen for the present study.

This research looks into ten profiles drawn from my Facebook “friends” list, whose profile pictures and cover photos will be analyzed, five male and five female users. Since existing research has mostly concentrated on the self-presentational practices of adolescents and college-aged students, I decided upon including users 25-36 years of age who are master students, PhD candidates or working. In essence, I see myself as an “insider” researcher, whose initial identity on Facebook has been “member.” I am “immersed” in the culture of the site since 2008, being active in posting content both textual and visual. In this sense my research could be seen as somewhat “auto-ethnographic” since I bring my own personal experiences and biases to the study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I am also aware that the sample I have chosen, being pooled from my own environment and also being small in size, is limited in the diversity it offers.

4.3 Using questionnaires to gamer user descriptions and interpretations of visual self-presentation

In the final part of my analysis, I will look into how Facebook users themselves ponder and experience the issue of their visual self-presentation when selecting their profile and cover photos (Q3). For this purpose, I utilize an open-ended questionnaire, distributed to the ten users whose profiles I chose to analyze. The main questions ask participants to describe in detail their current profile and cover photo, to explain what it is that prompts them to change either one of them, who they imagine to be their audience, to what extent comments affect the period of time that they use them and how they understand the different uses of the profile from the cover picture (the whole questionnaire is provided in the Appendix). The questionnaire is a type of structured interview which asks all participants the same questions in a predetermined order, using a consistent approach, format and words (Brennen, 2013: 28). This has the advantage that all participants are treated equally. To “make” the questionnaire more flexible and more apt to qualitative analysis, I chose to include only open-ended questions. Such questions offer the respondent the freedom to produce an answer themselves without being influenced by specific closed alternatives given (Brennen, 2013: 33) and, thus, the researcher can look deeper into the thoughts of the subjects.

To analyze the descriptions users make of their photos, I will use once again as a guide the four categories (participants, setting, topic and aesthetics/style) inspired by Chalfen’s sociovidistic framework. In this manner I will be able to loosely compare and contrast the previous findings that are a result of my own examination and the users’ point of view. The question concerning the perceived audience of the photos essentially pertains to the category of participants. And the question with regard to the comments on the profile and cover images aims to reveal to what extent the feedback received by fellow Facebook users influences the practices of visual self-presentation.

At this point, I should state clearly that I am aware that during instances in which topics affect self-impression and are ego-sensitive (such as Facebook profile and cover pictures), respondents may be more likely to distort information

and offer responses that are more culturally favorable. Furthermore, I fully acknowledge that interpretive questions as the ones chosen would perhaps be best addressed through in-depth interviews in the form of guided conversations rather than through a structured interview in the form of a questionnaire. However, the length of this study does not permit such venture. After all, this method is employed to complement the overall analysis concerning the visual self-presentation of Facebook users. As Zhao et al. suggest, to advance the line of online self-presentation research is to “combine investigators’ “objective” coding of the profiles with users’ subjective interpretations of their own activities” (2008: 1832).

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Affordances of Facebook with regard to profile pictures and cover photos

A Facebook cover photo is a large horizontal image that appears stripped across the top of each user's profile page, a feature introduced as part of the Timeline, the social network's big redesign in late 2011.⁷ Each user also has a separate profile photo, which is a smaller image that appears right below the cover image, slightly inset into the large cover photo (Figure 1). Although the cover photo arguably occupies a much larger space in one's Timeline (profile page), the thumbnail of the profile picture is the one that appears beside the individual's name whenever that person sends a status update or takes an action that triggers an update for other friends. Similar to the experience of "first impression" in face-to-face meetings, an individual's profile picture and cover photo are the first point of reference when encountering their online presence.

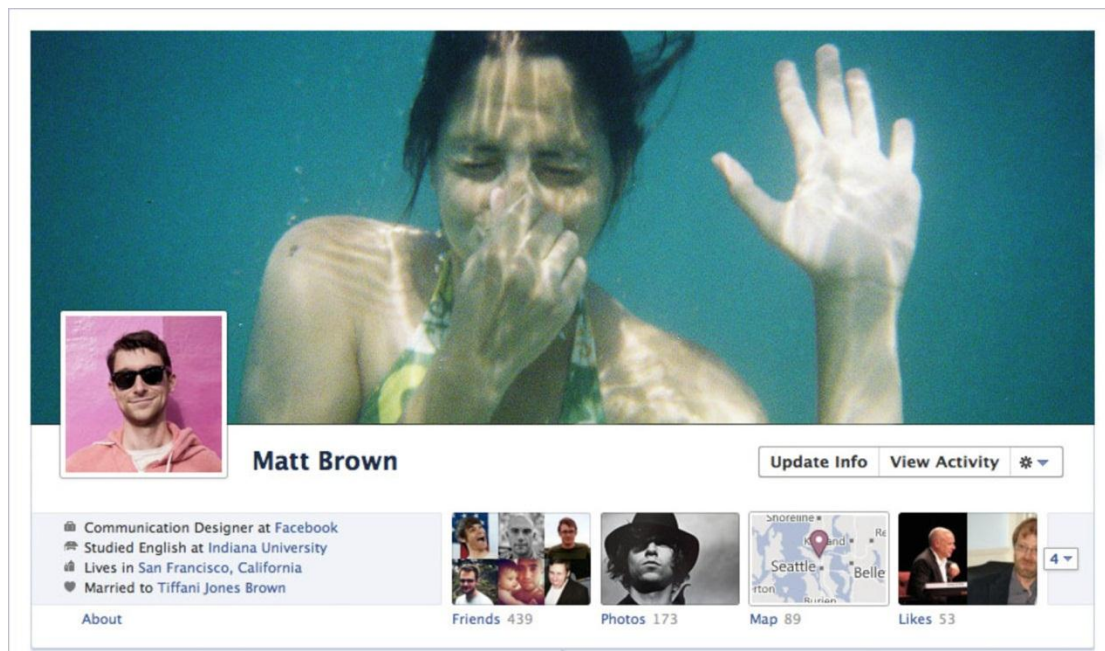


Figure 1: Example Facebook profile picture and cover photo. (Note: this is a mock profile which Facebook has been using as an example since it introduced the Timeline in 2011).

⁷Facebook introducing the Timeline: <https://www.facebook.com/about/timeline>

As outlined by the very scriptures of the site, these two types of images are meant to serve a different purpose: the profile picture is “how people recognize you” while the cover photo is “your chance to feature a unique image that represents who you are or what you care about.”⁸ In fact, Facebook urges users to post a unique and individualized cover “like a photo from a wedding, day at the beach or birthday party” and not photos that aim to show solidarity or express support for a cause or organization, as such photos could lead to confusion and be considered spams.⁹ This clearly shows that the site’s intentions are to enforce people to upload self-generated content of their real lives.

To this end, Facebook facilitates greatly the management of profile and cover photos. To add or change either one of these images, users simply go to their profiles, click on “add a profile picture” or “cover photo” respectively or hover over their current images and click on “update profile picture” or “cover photo” (Figures 2 & 3). They can either select a photo they have already uploaded, one they are tagged in, to upload a photo from their computer or even take a new photo. Alternatively, when users browse their tagged or uploaded photos, they can click on “options” and directly make the selected picture a profile or cover photo. Once the image is selected, users crop it (the profile picture) or reposition it (the cover photo) and click “save.” Facebook does not indicate a limit as to how many profile and cover images a user can upload. Therefore, Facebook design stimulates the frequent updating of both images.



Figure 2: Change/update profile picture.



Figure 3: Change/update cover photo.

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/help/388305657884730/>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/help/467610326601639/>

When users opt to add or update their profile and cover pictures, such action is announced to all friends via the News Feed, the constantly updating list of stories in the middle of one's home page. The News Feed feature makes posted material easily accessible and visible by aggregating and displaying them in reverse chronological order and, thus, affords social connectivity and interactivity: an update of one's profile or cover image invites likes and comments by those who become aware of this change. The "like" button signifies a stamp of approval while comments are, as put by boyd, "not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience" (boyd, 2011: 45). Another feature closely connected to photos, which affords social connectivity, is that of tagging. Tagging (linking a person to one's photograph) allows users to communicate who they hang out with and on what occasions they hang out with them. Again, via the News Feed, friends become aware of who was tagged with whom and on what photographic occasion, which, in turn, reinforces social interactivity since it triggers even more likes and comments. Also, content discovery is greatly facilitated due to the fact that both profile and cover images are automatically separately archived in chronological order in the respective albums under "photos." This way images are filtered, ordered and easily searchable, presenting what one could call a "carefully curated life" (Van House, 2011: 131).

A very important aspect of profile and cover pictures is that they are publicly accessible for anyone, either they are a member of Facebook or not, by default. There are no privacy settings that may apply to the current cover photo of a user. Anyone can click on it and see it in full size, comments, likes and captions included. In the case of the profile picture, the user can determine access with the help of the audience selector tool (Figure 4). However, this customization only prevents unwanted audiences to view the profile image in full size while anyone can see it in a user's timeline and it still appears everywhere on Facebook as a thumbnail. Facebook permits users to make both profile and cover images private once they cease to be currently used, but such action can be carried out only manually, choosing the desired audience for each one of the images separately.



Figure 4: The audience selector tool, which determines access.

Thus, the profile picture and cover photo constitute public spaces, granting members limited control over the privacy of their posted content. Even though the main type of connection enabled by Facebook is the reciprocal relationship (i.e., one has to accept a friend request to establish a connection), the public nature of profile and cover images facilitates unidirectional connections, given that access to these images is open to everyone. This highly affects the visual self-presentation of users since lurkers, who share the same space but are not visible, are one potential audience. Lack of information about audience makes it difficult to determine what is socially appropriate to express or how the communicated message will likely be understood leading to the assumption that Facebook users turn to an imagined audience to assess whether their behavior is relevant or interesting (boyd, 2011: 50). Even so, contending with groups of people who reflect different social contexts and have different expectations as to what is appropriate can be challenging (ibid.). Thus, Facebook users deal with the tension between what they want the public to know in order to express their identity, connect and maintain relationships and what information could potentially harm them along the way and this tension might influence their selection of profile and cover images.

To summarize, Facebook design affords the easy management and frequent updating of profile and cover photos for users to visually present themselves. Furthermore, the News Feed and the tagging feature stimulate social connectivity and interactivity by inviting one's friends to like and comment these images. The automatic archiving of the photos renders them easily searchable for future scrutiny and revision. Being designed to be public and open to invisible audiences, profile and cover pictures promote not only

bidirectional but also unidirectional connections, rendering one's visual self-presentation challenging. However, these affordances do not determine social practice. Users are implicitly and explicitly contending with them as a central part of their participation. It is, therefore, crucial to look into how users themselves navigate these affordances.

5.2 User appropriation choices of visual self-presentation via Facebook profile and cover images

The profile pictures and cover photos of ten Facebook users, five male and five female, 25 to 36 years of age were chosen to be examined thoroughly with their consent. The number of profile images ranged from 4 to 139 while the number of cover photos ranged from 7 to 61. From these profiles, women had uploaded more profile and cover images than men. The most important findings of the analysis are organized around Chalfen's categories as described in the methods chapter (see 4.2): participants (on and off camera), topics and settings, aesthetics/style of the pictures and, finally, the comments. Since there are substantial differences between the two types of images, the findings will be presented separately, starting with the analysis of the profile pictures and then moving to the cover photos.

Profile pictures: participants, topics and settings, aesthetics, comments

Even though, according to Facebook, the profile picture is "how people recognize you," among the photographs under scrutiny, only one third were single-person, depicting the owner of the profile. Users of this study appeared to favor images pulled from the Internet such as famous film snapshots, drawings, graffiti, memes, and cartoons (approximately another one third), in an effort to present themselves by leaving visual cues that would indicate their likes, tastes, sense of aesthetics and sense of humor (Figure 5). A substantial amount of the profile images depicted the profile owners with one or more friends, demonstrating the tendency for this group of users to emphasize a group-oriented identity (Figure 6), a result which confirms findings of other studies focusing on the role of the profile image in visual self-presentation (Strano, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008: 1826).

Half the users included their siblings in one or more profile photos but none displayed pictures with parents or other family members. Surprisingly, romantic relationships were not demonstrated visually by this group of users. Pictures of landscapes were seldom used. Each profile picture uploaded, either a single-person shot, a group photo, or an Internet image, is intended to be viewed by Facebook peers and, thus, constitutes what Erving Goffman calls a performance. After all, following Goffman's definition, a performance is "all activity on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (1959: 15).



Figure 5: Examples of profile pictures pulled from the internet (drawing, graffiti, cartoon).



Figure 6: Examples of profile pictures which emphasize a group-oriented identity.

A very common tactic of this group of users was the use of the tagging feature, which was employed not only to explicitly indicate who else was depicted in the profile picture along with the profile owner but also to credit the photographer who was off camera and, thus, in the same (photographic) occasion. The tagging feature, as mentioned earlier, emphasizes social connectivity and interactivity by inviting more people (the friends of everyone tagged in addition to the friends of the profile owner) to view, comment or like the image. In other words, tagging not only explicitly demonstrates social bonds

(who is hanging out with whom), but also urges people to witness and contribute to the performance, to become co-participants or, simply put, the audience (Goffman, 1959: 16).

Looking at the privacy settings of the profile pictures of the participants who were studied, only one out of ten opted to share their images only with friends. For everyone else, the content of their images remained public to everyone, signifying that perhaps not all individuals possess the time, ability and willingness to micromanage their Facebook identities. However, by not limiting access, users, consciously or unconsciously, carry out their performances before a vast, possibly unknown audience.

There are a plethora of topics and settings in the profile pictures under examination indicating that users are very versatile in their choices of visual self-presentation. The images chosen ranged from special occasions to the everyday. More commonly, users in this group included photographs of themselves while travelling abroad, on summer holidays by the sea, in weddings, in various parties drinking and dancing, but also at cafes having a casual coffee, at home, in parks sitting on the grass, even at work. Interestingly, all participants included at least one profile picture in which they were in a costume party all dressed up.

Participants in this study were also found to be resourceful in the style/aesthetics of their profile images. Most pictures were centered and taken straight on with the subject(s) consciously posing, looking at the camera/photographer and smiling. When the picture was single-person and the subject appeared serious, without smiling or grimacing, there was rarely eye contact with the camera. The majority of profile images were taken at a medium to close distance, thus limiting the amount of background in the photos except when subjects were on vacation abroad or in a beach on a sunny day, where they consciously and skillfully included monuments, streets or the sea. Therefore, in profile images of this group the emphasis on the self is highlighted by the limited inclusion of contextual information. There is also an apparent awareness of the camera during the shooting event and performances were produced specifically for the camera by a single or several subjects.

A very noteworthy aspect is that participants of this study applied digital filters and frames to the pictures and enhanced the contrast using not necessarily sophisticated tools but more likely easy-to-use photo editing

software. This way pictures were rendered more bright and colorful, or, conversely, black and white or sepia, having a more “artistic” quality. Two of the participants used tools that turn a photograph into a cartoon-like drawing for several of their pictures (Figure 7). Drawing on Walther’s hyperpersonal communication model (1996), it can be inferred that users take advantage of Facebook’s asynchronous nature in order to enhance the otherwise normal process of self-presentation and impression management. Simply put, users possess an unlimited amount of time to construct and refine their performances, that is their profile pictures, prior to uploading them.

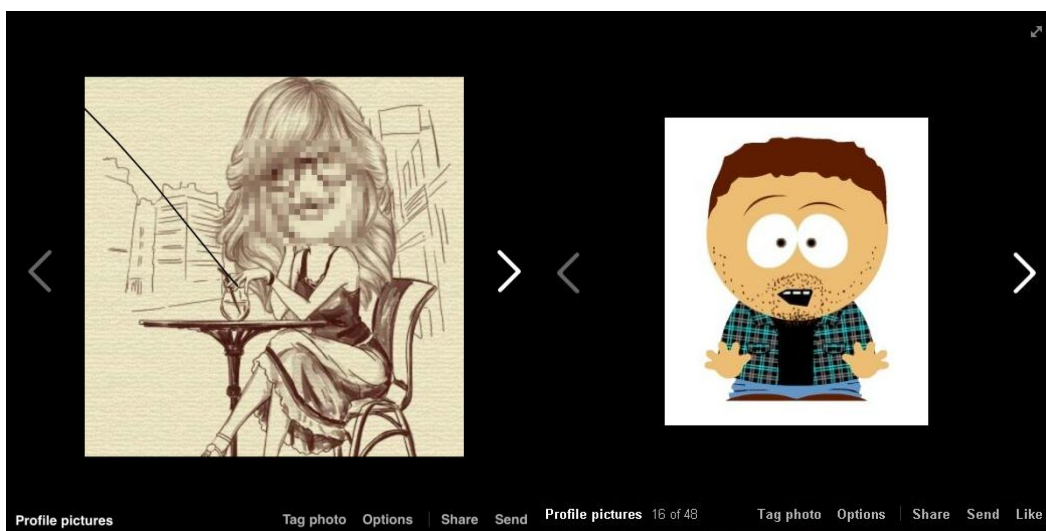


Figure 7: Profile photos converted into cartoons with the use of online tools.

Not surprisingly, a common aesthetic format apparent in all ten profiles under scrutiny was the selfie. Both male and female users used their self-portraits to visually present themselves, with women showing a slight preference for selfies than men. A female participant, who had the most prolific collection of profile images from all users under investigation, used as many as 24 self-shots for her profile. Male users were more likely to photograph themselves through windows or mirrors, hiding part of their face or consciously making the end-result blurry or out of focus (Figure 8). Both genders had group selfies with friends, posing and grimacing towards the camera. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis (see 3.2), the selfie offers ultimate control over one’s image, since the photographer and the subject are the same person. For that matter, the selfie is

viewed as a means of constructing a positive image or, as more blatantly put, a tool of self-promotion (Tifentale, 2013: 7).

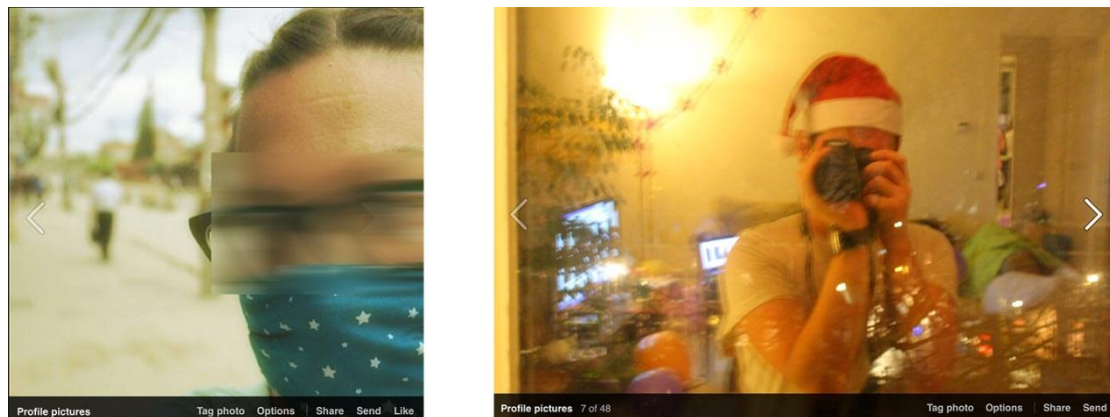


Figure 8: Selfies as profile pictures, a female and a male user.

Over half the profile pictures under scrutiny triggered verbal feedback which, in essence, constitute an interaction between the profile owner (performer) and his/her Facebook peers (audience). Going back to Goffman, an interaction may be defined as “all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence” (1959: 15). It should be noted that the most recently uploaded profile pictures from the collection analyzed were also the most commented ones, indicating that people have increasingly grown more active and more familiar with Facebook. Furthermore, images drawn from the Internet were very rarely commented while those depicting the profile owner alone or within a social context almost always had at least one comment. This shows that user-generated photos are far more easily consumed and invite people to observe and actively participate in the evaluation process. The great majority of comments that were analyzed concentrated on the physical appearance of the user (or anyone else depicted) and were always flattering (i.e. “you look gorgeous”). A lot of people used comments to express their affection for the subject(s), using more than often emoticons and heart symbols. In the cases that the profile owner had tagged other users who appeared in the picture or who took the picture, comments would aggregate. Almost always, when someone was tagged, this person would drop a line in the commentary space, to articulate explicitly the relationship with everyone who participated in the photographic occasion. Many

comments were found to be humorous and very often were incomprehensible to an outsider and intended for a very specific audience, colloquially put “inside jokes,” again to demonstrate important bonds between friends. From all the comments examined, none was negative.

Cover photos: participants, topics and settings, aesthetics, comments

From all ten profiles under investigation, cover images were much less in number than profile photos. This is partly due to the fact that cover photos were introduced much later in the platform’s design while profile images were a prominent characteristic of the Facebook profile page ever since the platform was launched. However, even after the introduction of cover photos, users in this group were found to not update them as frequently as their profile images. This indicates that between the two types of images, giving a performance in the form of a cover photo was viewed by this group of users as less important.

Cover photos under scrutiny were also much less rich in content. They rarely portrayed the profile owner alone and even when they did, they were taken from such distance that the emphasis was placed on the background. Group photos arguably exceeded single-person ones, but again were relatively small in number. The great majority of cover images of this group was divided between material drawn from the Internet (cartoon heroes, movie scenes, graffiti and cards with humorous or philosophic quotes, old advertisements) and landscapes photographed almost always by the profile owner (Figure 9). Images pulled directly from the Internet, similar to profile photos of this kind, were indicative of one’s likes, humor and aesthetics. The user-generated ones more commonly depicted places that the profile owner has come across and were judged as photo-worthy and eligible to be uploaded. Thus, the cover photos of the ten profiles under examination were seemingly less person-centered than profile images and can be thought of as more generic.



Figure 9: Example of a cover photo depicting a landscape photographed by the user.

The tagging feature was seldom employed in the cover photos of this group of users and exclusively in user-generated content. Its use was limited to the few group pictures to signal participation more explicitly. Also, in a few cases where the cover image was “borrowed” by another user, the tag aimed to credit the actual photographer. From the vast amount of landscape photos, a small amount had tags of people who, albeit absent from the photo, were present during the shooting event.

With no exception, the cover photos of the participants of this study were all publicly accessible. As mentioned earlier (see 5.1), cover photos that are currently used are public by default and this can only change if a new cover photo is chosen. The fact that no user whose pictures were under examination went back to change the privacy settings demonstrates once again (as in the case of profile pictures) an unwillingness or lack of interest in micromanaging Facebook profiles as far as self-uploaded content is concerned. According to Bernie Hogan (2010), a specialist in social network technology at the Oxford Internet Institute in the UK, such behavior can be explained with the theory of the lowest common denominator. He argues that “[o]ne might not be posting for one’s parents (or children or students) on Facebook, but again, one is posting in

light of the fact that these individuals may have access; these individuals define the lowest common denominator of what is normatively acceptable” (2010: 383). Thus, users in this group may seem indifferent to who has access to their content, yet their visual performances are in reference to specific salient individuals who are most likely small in number to be coherent.

The components of topics and settings were much more highlighted in cover (in which, as mentioned already, the emphasis is not placed on the self) than in profile images. The landscape photos of the ten participants were more commonly taken while on vacation, depicting touristic attractions such as monuments, streets, flea markets or natural surroundings of places that the profile owner has visited. Thus, they would mostly reflect special occasions. However, the everyday was present in cover photos as well, for instance a photo of one’s favorite café, a bicycle in a park on a sunny day, a group photo of housemates in their shared living room, the street view as captured through one’s bedroom window (Figure 10).

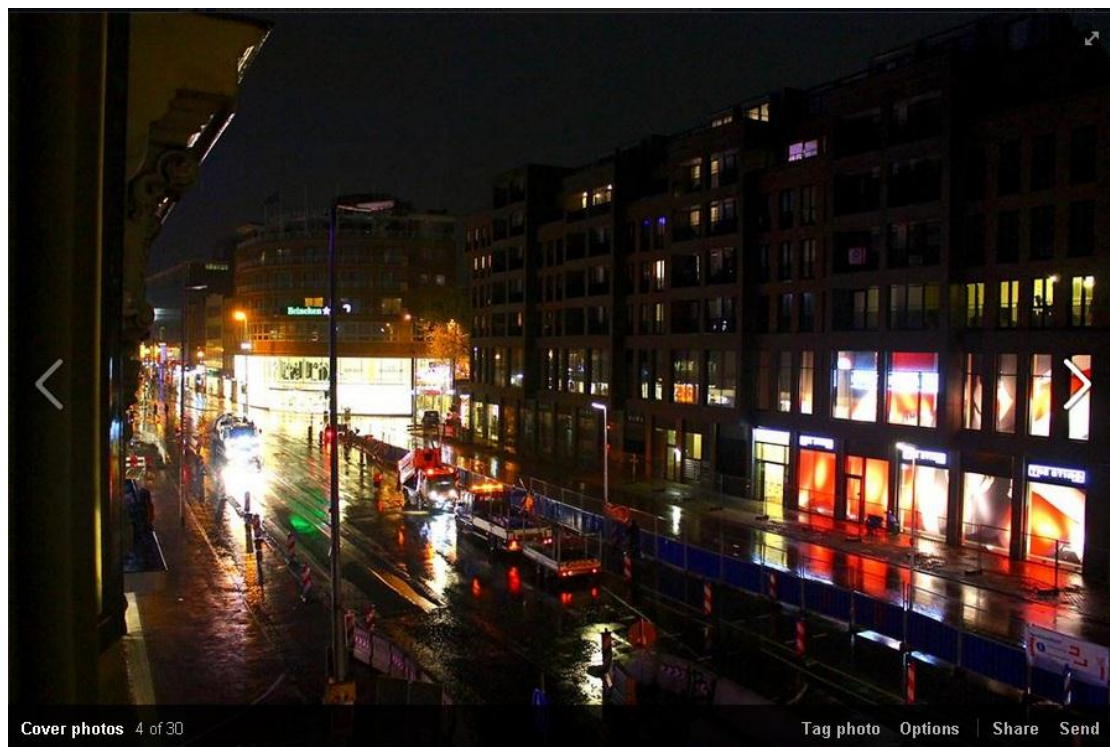


Figure 10: A user's cover image depicting the street view from his apartment.

As far as style/aesthetics is concerned, participants in this study used their expertise and photographic skills while staging the shot so that their

pictures of landscapes would have a postcard-like effect and reflect their adventurous and traveling spirit. For the collection of cover photos that were analyzed, the scarce amount of images portraying the profile owner would only show the subject's back or side-view in combination to what is depicted in the background (Figure 11). In these single-person shots, the subject never looked directly at the camera or pose but most often would appear to be unconscious that the photo was taken. In cover photos, as opposed to profile images, there was a complete absence of selfies. From all the cover photos that were closely observed, none depicted the profile owner taking a self-portrait and only two images fell into the category of selfies, which were in fact group selfies. In group cover images people would pose smiling and grimacing, just like in group profile pictures. Unlike the profile pictures, however, where users put significant effort in the post production as well, the cover images of this group of users were not digitally edited (at least not in an apparent way) apart from very few exceptions: in one picture, the user cropped the original faces that were depicted to replace them with the faces of friends and his own and in another one, a user made a digital collage of certain photographs of him and his friends.

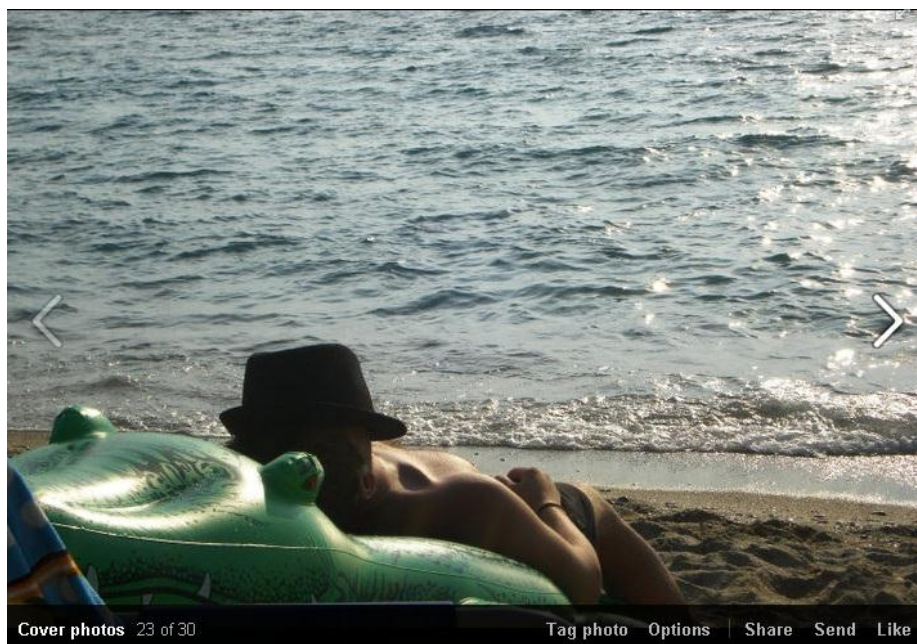


Figure 11: The profile owner is depicted in the cover photo but the emphasis is placed on the background.

The cover pictures under investigation, when compared to profile photos, did not invite a lot of comments, which indicates that the less person-centered images are the less verbal feedback they garner from Facebook peers. As most cover pictures depicted landscapes, a substantial number of comments aimed to praise the profile owner's photographic skills or express jealousy for being able to travel to that particular place. Cover images pulled from the internet did not receive as many comments as user-generated photographs but at times they did trigger a conversation: a female user uploaded a screenshot of an anime film and friends would express their opinion on whether the film was good or whether the sequel was better. Again, group pictures, especially those that included tags of everyone portrayed, were the ones that invited more comments, flattering and humorous, similar to those in the profile images. For instance, in one group photo of friends, another profile owner would comment "I get by with a little help from my friends" to express her affection and corroborate her bond with everyone depicted in the same image. The comments that followed were emoticons smiling and heart symbols which indicated that the visual performance of the user was well-received.

5.3 User interpretations of self-presentation through profile pictures and cover photos

The ten participants were also asked to fill in an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix). They provided descriptions of their current profile and cover images and interpretations of their choices. In addition, they indicated who they perceive as their audience, whether verbal feedback affect their visual self-disclosure and how they understand the different uses of the profile from the cover image for expressing their identity. The categories inspired by Chalfen's sociovidistic framework and employed earlier, will once again be used as a guide for analysis. The goal here is not to repeat findings already discussed from the previous analysis, but to complement them using insights from the participants' point of view as expressed in their answers.

In their descriptions of their profile images all ten participants in this study gave accurate and detailed accounts. It is worthy to underline that two

aspects were emphasized by everyone: for one thing, they all stressed out that they were smiling in the picture. Smiling pertains to one's *manner*, that is "to those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in an oncoming situation" (Goffman, 1959: 24). When users opt to visually present themselves smiling, they clearly intend to give a positive impression. Second, they gave much importance, more than expected, on the colors of the photograph, as an eminent characteristic for choosing it.

Aesthetics seem to be valued highly by everyone in the group of users that were studied. One female participant explained that her profile picture was in fact taken with an analogue camera and was chosen because she liked the retro quality to it (Figure 12). Another female respondent had her profile photo taken by a professional photographer and described it as "artistic" (Figure 13). When asked why they chose the particular profile image, nearly all participants responded that the main reason was that they believed they looked attractive in them. This corroborates previous findings (Strano, 2008; Siibak, 2009; Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010) and is in line with the notion that performers tend to offer their observers an impression that is idealized (Goffman, 1959: 35). Another common response was that the picture was reminiscent of a special moment or period. Apart from the good looks, the ten participants visually presented themselves in an effort to reflect their self-confidence and their relaxed attitude towards life. The most cited reasons that prompted these users to change their profile images were out of boredom, a really good new photo in which they appear attractive or a significant change in their lives. No one contended that their profile images were significantly different from the types of photographs they usually post on Facebook, however, six participants did admit that they have untagged photos because they thought they did not look nice in them and because they were depicting them in situations that they did not want all their friends to see.

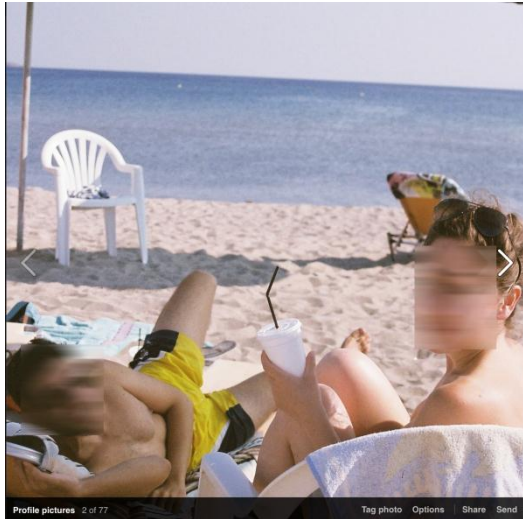


Figure 12: Profile photo taken with an analogue camera.



Figure 13: Profile photo taken by a professional photographer.

The ten participants chosen for this study listed their friends as the audience that they imagine viewing their profile pictures. Over half respondents added their family members and people from work as potential consumers of their visual self-presentation. Three of the respondents, two females and one male, claimed that when selecting their profile image they also consider “potential romantic partners” as their audience. Only one female user explicitly showed her awareness of the public nature of the profile image arguing that “my profile picture is open, so I keep in mind that everyone can see it.”

Six respondents claimed that comments and likes, that is verbal feedback from other users, do not affect their choices of profile pictures. The other four participants seemed to contemplate on the comments. A female user argued that comments gave her “mini boosts of confidence and joy.” A male user wrote that “if people are writing comments at the photo at a certain period of time, I consider the photo as being “active”, meaning that it generates a discussion, therefore I do not change it for that period of time.” Another male respondent noted that “a lot of likes and comments suggest that it is a popular picture, which in turn makes me feel popular and accepted by society.” Last, a female user asserted that “if a picture receives a large number of likes it is more likely that I will keep it longer” and “if a new picture receives a smaller number of likes, it is more likely that I will go back to the previous one.” Thus, all ten participants in this group of users seemed interested in prompting interaction

and garnering positive feedback (flattering comments and likes) via their visual performances.

Interesting insights surfaced when this group of users answered questions about their cover photos. Again, the ten participants pointed to the significance of aesthetics: color and brightness were the two most common references in the cover photo descriptions. The user-generated cover pictures were found to serve as mementos and keepsakes of places, vacations or trips that are valued highly by the participants. Both types of cover photos, user-generated or pulled from the Internet, according to all participants of this study mostly reflected their mood at a certain period, and also their beliefs and sense of aesthetics. For instance, a female respondent chose as her cover picture a colorful graffiti that says “the power of girl” because it is close to her beliefs (“I am very interested in gender equality”) and she finds it aesthetically nice (Figure 14). A male user had displayed a graffiti quoting “are you breathing,” as put by him “to remind me this question every day” (Figure 15). A change of mood was what usually prompted them to move to the next cover image. Three of the participants explained that among the criteria for selecting their cover photos was that they would match in terms of content and color with their profile pictures. For instance, a user’s cover photo depicting trees in a park during winter was taken from the same trip as his profile image, which shows him posing in a similar setting (Figure 16). To these users, the profile and the cover photo are not two distinct performances but rather a unified one.



Figure 14: Graffiti as cover photo:
“The power of girl.”



Figure 15: Graffiti as cover photo:
“Are you breathing?”



Figure 16: A Facebook user choosing both profile and cover picture from the same trip in order for images to match in terms of content and color.

All ten participants contended that profile pictures and cover photos served different purposes in their visual self-presentation. Half the respondents argued that the profile picture would most likely depict them in various situations whereas the cover photo would serve a more decorative function, representing likes and tastes and complimenting the profile image. As put by a female user “the cover photo is the font, the setting, it is more abstract and supporting in its role, it establishes a certain vibe in the page and an artistic expression,” while the profile picture “is the star of the situation and usually more person-centered.” A male user added that the profile picture “is used more as a personal “presentation,” while the cover photo is mostly something that I would like to share because it gives me a positive feeling, I may find it funny, clever, cool etc.” Interestingly, three participants expressed a slightly different opinion. Rather than seeing the role of the cover photo as secondary to that of the profile image, they explained that the profile picture is mostly a way to communicate what one looks like and the cover photo is a means to express one’s mood or emotional state. As put by a male user “a profile picture is the outer-self and the cover photo is the inner-self.” Clearly, by acknowledging distinct qualities to each type of image, all users in this study basically admitted

that it is the interplay of the profile and cover image that would grant them the possibility to visually present their identity.

6. DISCUSSION

From both the literature review and the analysis, it is postulated that online communities such as SNSs and, consequently, Facebook, offer a gateway for identity construction. Clearly, the Internet has not created new motivation for self-presentation, but does provide new tools to implement such motives. In line with previous research, this thesis proposed to consider notions of impression management as a useful theoretical foil for understanding online behavior and online visual self-presentation in particular. Moreover, it suggested that consideration should be given to the changing landscape of personal photography and its social uses with the transition to digital. In the following, focusing on my main research question (“How is identity formation afforded by the interplay of Facebook profile and cover photos?”), I will elaborately explain how the findings of my analyses relate to the theoretical approach I have chosen as a frame of reference.

First of all, Facebook, as a networked technology, has introduced new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts (boyd, 2011: 45). These affordances can shape how people engage and negotiate with such environments. When it comes to profile and cover photos, as described in detail earlier, users are afforded the opportunity to easily manage the content of the images and to frequently update them at will. Thus, Facebook provides a fertile ground for individuals to actualize (visual) performances, with no constraints as far as content and frequency is concerned, similar to face-to-face encounters as described in Goffman's impression management framework. Features like the News Feed and tagging promote social connectivity and interactivity by inviting people to look at one's profile and cover images and to comment or like them, that is to evaluate them. Goffman claims that for a performance to take place, an audience (of one or more people in addition to the performer) is required, who either endorses or dismisses the performer's claims. Facebook facilitates the aggregation of an audience with such features and also provides the means for audience members to give verbal feedback to performers. In other words, profile and cover pictures both represent the individual and serve as a locus for interaction. However, as highlighted by numerous researchers, this audience is more than often diverse and heterogeneous, comprised of different

social spheres, and, thus, Facebook users cannot target their performances as they would do while in the physical presence of others. Especially in the case of profile and cover images, which constitute publicly accessible spaces, users have limited to no control over who views their visual self-presentations and, thus, perform in front of invisible audiences. Taking into account that looking at photos has become the most frequent online leisure activity, surpassing listening to music (Eftekhari et al., 2014: 162), the unidirectional connections afforded by the public nature of profile and cover images have their merit.

Even though Facebook contains inherent potentialities and affordances, as well as constraints, the ultimate decision of how to manoeuvre in the network lies with the user. After analyzing both the appropriation choices of visual self-presentations of ten users drawn from my own Facebook environment as well as their interpretations of their activities, it can be inferred that users exploiting Facebook profile and cover images for performing identity in a never-ending process towards coherence and intelligibility are, effectively, doing what we do when we have a conversation, perhaps in a cafe, with a friend and speak of ourselves, desires, experiences, recent actions, tastes (Cover, 2012: 181). From the ten profiles under scrutiny, there were great variations in the kinds of self-images produced. Some pictures were carefully choreographed and well-polished: users had used photo editing software to highlight colors, to adjust the contrast, to apply filters. Other images were simple and rough. A substantial number of photos were self-portraits, selfies, which are attempts at self-branding, trying to “sell” the best version of #me (Tifentale, 2014: 6). However, regardless of levels of sophistication, all users in this study opted for pictures of themselves that they would classify as attractive, that they would reflect their self-confidence and their relaxed and positive attitude towards life. Thus, all ten users attempted to project a self that is socially desirable. In essence, it is through impression management that users can actualize their hoped-for possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 961) or ideal selves (Higgins, 1987: 320), in other words the identities they hope to establish.

Clearly, the selection of both profile and cover photos appeared to be a conscious and purposeful decision. Arguably, presenting one’s identity online is challenging due to the asynchronous nature and the limited cues of computer mediated communication (Walther, 2007: 2540). However, the use of visual

rather than textual self-presentation seemed to offer participants of this study an array of expressive equipment to convey symbolic information about themselves. This expressive equipment is what Goffman calls “front,” which comprises of the setting (scenery and stage props), the appearance and manner. From the analysis, participants chose to portray themselves while traveling, in parties, in weddings, at the sea, in the context of friends, grimacing or to include pictures of landscapes they have visited, graffiti with quotes that express their viewpoint, images from the Internet that reflect their sense of aesthetics. Thus, they seemed to favor particular fronts: the traveler/tourist, the partier, the social, the funny, the competent photographer, the thinker, the artist. Facebook users rehearse their visual self-presentations (selecting the images, photo editing) in the backstage prior to posting the images online as profile or cover in the front stage, that is on Facebook, where the performance actually takes place.

Users, whose images were closely observed, carefully crafted their visual self-presentations and masked involuntary cues in order to convey desirable impressions, by intentionally articulating information through their photos with the belief that the audience would comprehend what they mean. These are what Goffman defines as expressions given. However, users appeared to be aware of the risk of revealing information unintentionally that could potentially harm their self-presentations, the expressions given off. This is why several participants admitted to have untagged their names from photographs that they judged that did not represent them favorably. Also, the realization that expressions are given off beyond their control or mastery, made users attentive to comments, which constitute the audience’s feedback of the performer’s claims.

The profile pictures and cover photos under investigation appeared to be potent agents of personal and group memory, relationship creating and maintenance, self-presentation and self-expression, that is to fulfill all four social uses of personal photography as discerned by Van House et al. (2005). First and foremost, in these images participants visually played out their lives for each other, demonstrating their identity and participating in communal photographic exchanges. As Van Dijck asserts, digital photography offers the possibility of a stronger emphasis on the role photography plays in identity formation, with a de-emphasis on traditional notions of memory preservation (2008: 57). Users were eager to display themselves in numerous photographic occasions, substituting

one photograph and, thus, one front for another. However, the need to maintain memories and keepsakes via pictures and, consequently, to upload them as profile or cover, has not vanished once and for all. Respondents did state explicitly that several pictures were selected because they reminded them of certain occasions which they experienced either alone or within a social context. The common tactic of this group of Facebook users to include friends in their profile and cover images, as well as the frequent use of the tagging feature, essentially demonstrates that through these practices, users declare and corroborate shared experiences and relationships. Furthermore, profile pictures and especially cover photos seem to offer an outlet for self-expression where individuals can project their photographic and editing skills and their sense of aesthetics.

In essence, Facebook profile and cover images allow individuals to articulate their identity as social beings by providing them a public space with a large, albeit diverse and invisible, audience, by facilitating the management of the content, by offering features that stimulate social connectivity (tagging) and interactivity (comments). Users appropriate these affordances to project an enhanced sense of self. The profile picture is mainly used to communicate their physical attractiveness, self-confidence, easygoingness, sociality, humor. The cover picture is more of a space for self-expression where individuals strive to project an interesting, artistic, thinking, sophisticated sense of self. It is through the interplay of the profile and the cover image that Facebook users can present and shape themselves visually in public.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to investigate the role of Facebook profile pictures and cover photos in online self-presentation and identity formation. From the literature review, it is postulated that people in nonymous online settings, and SNSs in particular, would consciously and strategically select photographs in an effort to project an enhanced sense of self. Therefore, this study has proposed to take as a point of departure Erving Goffman's (1959) ideas on impression management and use his terms and metaphors as a lens through which to see Facebook profiles to gain insight into online behavior and visual self-presentation. It also suggested that, since this research is specifically geared to photographic presentations of the self, consideration should be given to the changing landscape of personal photography and its social uses with the transition to digital.

More precisely, this study has aspired to examine how the specific design affordances of Facebook with regard to profile and cover photos shape and influence the self-presentation strategies available for the users, how users navigate these affordances when selecting their profile and cover images and how the users themselves describe and interpret their activities. Each of these three different aspects was carefully considered using a different method: material object analysis to track down Facebook's design affordances and constraints with regard to profile and cover images in an effort to grasp in what ways they shape user engagement; qualitative analysis of the profile and cover images of ten users from my own Facebook environment using as a coding device Richard Chalfen's (1975) sociovidistic framework to look into how users navigate these affordances; open-ended questionnaire where the same users provided descriptions of their profile and cover images and interpretations of their choices.

The results of the distinct analyses tied to my theoretical framework (impression management, digital personal photography) have produced interesting insights. For one thing, every image uploaded as a profile or cover photo, being intended to be viewed and assessed by Facebook peers, constitutes what Goffman calls a performance. From the material object analysis it can be inferred that, as in face-to-face encounters, where one can carry out an

unlimited number of performances, Facebook greatly facilitates the easy management, unlimited uploading and frequent updating of profile and cover images. Both the News Feed and tagging ensure that Facebook users will have an audience to witness and evaluate their performance. These features make posted material, in this case profile and cover photos, easily accessible and visible to other Facebook members and, thus, afford social connectivity and interactivity by inviting one's friends to like or comment these images. Facebook also plays the role of the "curator" by automatically archiving in reverse chronological order both profile and cover images in the respective albums under "photos" and rendering them easily searchable at any given moment for further scrutiny. This possibility to go back to a performance with the potential to review and reassess it is impossible in face-to-face encounters.

However, Facebook design has its limitations as well. Profile and cover images, constituting public spaces accessible for diverse and often undefined audiences, deprive of users the opportunity to target their visual performances to specific members. Thus, both types of images afford not only bidirectional but also unidirectional connections. Individuals, without knowing who exactly they are performing for, cannot adjust their visual self-presentation to audience expectations and convey a desirable impression. The public nature of profile and cover images in combination with their easy retrieval for future observation raise new concerns as well: posting photos on Facebook intrinsically turns private pictures into public property and therefore diminishes one's power over their presentational context (Van Dijk, 2008: 60). Taken out of context, performances can easily be misinterpreted.

It is crucial to highlight that users not only exploit but also negotiate with these affordances when they select their profile and cover photos: some upload a prolific amount of images, some only a few; some make great use of the tagging feature others seldom employ it. From the content analysis of the images as well as from user interpretations, all ten participants whose profiles were analyzed purposefully opted for images that would represent them favorably and in which they could project an idealized version of themselves, in other words their hoped-for possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 961) or their ideal selves (Higgins, 1987: 320). These pictures ranged from ceremonial moments to the everyday and, in them, users could take up different fronts which Goffman defines as the

totality of “expressive equipment” actors employ in order to convey symbolic information about themselves. The fronts favored by this group of users were those of the traveler, the artist, the social. Participants appeared to value comments made by their peers about their images as such feedback indicates whether a performance is endorsed or dismissed and gives room to users to alter their performance accordingly in order to generate the desirable impressions.

Profile and cover photos in combination were found to fulfill all four social uses of personal photography (Van House et al., 2005). However, it could roughly be inferred from the appropriation choices of this particular group of people, that profile images are more effective as objects of self-presentation and relationship creating and maintenance while cover photos are mostly used as a means for self-expression and of personal and group memory. Practices of image-editing as well as self-portraiture (selfies), present in numerous profile pictures that were analyzed, indicate users’ interest in fully controlling the impressions they are about to convey. In line with Joseph Walther’s (1996) hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication, users seemed to exploit the technological aspects of CMC, mainly its asynchronous nature. For that matter, they used unlimited time to construct and refine their visual performances prior to posting content by taking and editing their images and selectively presenting themselves, highlighting certain qualities and features while masking involuntary cues in order to manage impressions and facilitate desired relationships. From the substantial amount of group profile photos found in the pictures under scrutiny it can be inferred that social groups are built and sustained by communicating shared values and stories. Also, the great number of cover photos where all ten participants used images they themselves took and edited, proves their inherent need to experiment with expressing themselves through practices of image-making. From these images, as highlighted by the users themselves, some were taken and posted as cover photos because they were reminiscent of places, periods of time, or trips deemed special. In their responses, users argued that the profile picture and the cover photo serve two distinct functions: the former communicates what one looks like and is deemed more important while the latter is rather a means to express one’s mood or emotional state and is deemed as secondary. They also expressed the idea that

the profile and the cover photo are not two distinct performances but are used in combination and represent one single performance.

Goffman, in his work, observed that humans are first and foremost social; we know ourselves and the world through social interaction, and we have developed elaborate ways to conduct these interactions. Facebook does not fundamentally change any of these; it represents a change in degree, not a change in kind. With this in mind, Facebook can be described as a multi-audience identity production site and it is via the interplay of profile and cover images that the identities and everyday lives of individuals are being remediated into new contexts of social visibility and connection. danah boyd argues that profile generation is an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment (2011: 43). Slightly paraphrasing her, I argue that selecting profile pictures and cover photos is an explicit act of *visually* writing oneself into being.

This qualitative research has shown that Facebook profile images and cover photos are fertile ground for investigating the practices associated with self-presentation and identity formation in online networking environments and has provided a good foundation for future study. After all, small-scale studies such as this contribute to the cumulative picture of this phenomenon and are useful for comparisons across different contexts. Future research may benefit from expanding the methodology to include a larger sample size, utilizing direct interactions and in-depth interviews with the participants in correspondence with third party coding, as well as pulling from a much wider pool of the population to diversify the sample.

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APPENDIX – Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. What is your occupation?

Profile Pictures

3. Please describe in as much detail as you can your current Facebook profile picture.
4. Why did you choose this particular photograph?
5. Please complete the following sentence: "I think people who see this image would describe me as a person who..."
6. What usually prompts you to change your profile picture?
7. Is your current profile picture significantly different than the types of images you usually post on Facebook? If yes, how would you describe the difference?
8. Have you ever removed a "tag" identifying you on a photograph posted by another Facebook user? If yes, please explain why you removed the tag.
9. When you post a profile image, whom do you imagine viewing that photograph? (select all that apply)
 - Friends
 - Family members
 - People from work
 - Strangers
 - People I have just met
 - Other (please specify)
10. Do comments and likes on your profile picture affect the period of time that you use it? If yes, please explain how.

Cover Photos

11. Please describe in as much detail as you can your current Facebook cover photo
12. Why did you choose this cover photo?
13. What usually prompts you to change your cover photo?
14. Does the profile picture you choose serve a different purpose than your cover photo? Please describe briefly how you use each of the two types of photos to present yourself.