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## The Construction of the Virtual Self on MySpace

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### Abstract

*Social networking Internet sites are transforming the ways youth engage with others in their social worlds. This qualitative study examines communication processes of identity construction within social interactions among emerging adults using MySpace. One-on-one interviews in front of a computer monitor were conducted with five female and five male college students who were active users of MySpace. Participants were videotaped as they gave interviewers a tour of their MySpace profile. Participants reflected on their own profiles to answer questions about online communication and self-presentation. Analysis of the interviews and the profiles was carried out to understand communication on social networking sites, focusing on how features of MySpace are used as tools to construct social identities. Results revealed three major themes: 1) Visual metaphors are employed to display and solidify connection with others. 2) Through photos, users create a visual narrative of social identities connecting past and present social selves. 3) Visual images and multimedia become integrated in the sense of self as the line between advertisement and self-promotion disappears.*

Keywords: social network sites, self-presentation, online peer interactions, identity, commercialization

The most common use of the Internet among youth is to communicate with peers (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001). Social networking sites are transforming the ways they do so as they become more widely used and replace face-to-face interactions with online exchanges (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Because adolescents and emerging adults construct their identities through peer interactions (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1959), examining the nature of their online communication is critical to understanding the potential implications of these technologies for the process of identity development. The goal of this study is to examine how emerging adults present themselves to each other on social networking sites, as they construct a shared and relatively public social space in which images of the self are broadcast.

### Identity Development During Emerging Adulthood

A central developmental task during adolescence and emerging adulthood in industrialized nations is the creation of an individuated identity (Erikson, 1968). Identity is defined as selfhood, a continuous sense of sameness within oneself consisting of socially constructed self-concepts (Harter, 1999). These self-concepts include such things as one's perceived traits and roles, but also one's desired selves and one's social identity, that is, associations with others and affiliations with social groups. Psychological research on identity development most often focuses on how adolescents and emerging adults create a consolidated identity as they individuate themselves and move toward the achievement of adulthood (e.g. Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966; 1980; Waterman & Archer, 1990). Constructing this consolidated identity involves exploring possible selves, and then committing to a particular set of coherent self-definitions (Marcia, 1966; 1980).

Research shows that in industrialized nations, there is a prolonged period of exploration of possible selves after adolescence, before coherency in one's sense of self is fully established and adulthood achieved (Arnett, 2004; Waterman, 1999). These "possible selves" are unstable self-concepts not yet fully realized and particularly sensitive to feedback (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Social scientists have long theorized that identity is constructed through the feedback received as one manages impressions during social interactions and reflects upon the appraisals of others (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). During emerging adulthood, the most relevant information for the self-presentation of possible selves comes from peers (Grotevant, 1987). When emerging adults participate in peer relationships, they are presenting themselves to one another, trying out aspects of their identities, confirming or rejecting self-concepts through social feedback, and moving toward identity consolidation in the process (Nurmi, 2004).

### Self-Presentation on Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites offer an assortment of tools specifically designed to help users create a digital impression of who they are (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Because Internet tools have provided anonymity and freedom from the constraint of physical realities, they have furnished adolescents with increased opportunities to test out aspects of their identities (Greenfield, Gross, Subrahmanyam, Suzuki, & Tynes, 2006; Grisso & Weiss, 2005; Manago et al., 2008; Merskin, 2005; Vybiral, Smahel, & Divinova, 2004; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouter, 2006). In fact, Internet use among college students is associated with the moratorium identity status, a psychological classification characterized by exploration and lack of commitment to a defined sense of self (Matsuba, 2006).

Social networking sites no longer provide this anonymity because they have evolved to the point where online networks

significantly overlap with users' offline communities (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008); however, they still afford enhanced opportunities for adolescents and emerging adults to try out different aspects of their identities, now allowing users to gauge their friends' opinions of their online performances (Valkenburg et al., 2006). In fact, impression management and self-promotion to one's friends, alongside maintaining contact with them, have been found to be central motives for social network site use (Ibrahim, 2009; Kramer & Winter, 2008). These goals are often actualized through the use of photos. Visual impression management through photo selection plays a critical role in self-presentation on social networking sites (Pempek, Yevdokiya, Calvert, 2009; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008). College students are most likely to use photos to display physical attractiveness (Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008) and they can use photos to promote a desired or hoped for identity (Manago et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008). Friends commonly evaluate and leave public comments in response to their friends' photos, providing immediate and powerful feedback for these self-displays (Manago et al., 2008; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Indeed, research shows that users are acutely aware of the criteria for social approval from peers on social networking sites and are quite deliberate in choosing photos to represent themselves on their profiles that fit these standards (Siibak, 2009).

Motivations for self-promotion and impression management seem to induce self-disclosure on social networking sites (Ibrahim, 2009; Tufekci, 2008). Earlier studies suggested anonymity and limited non-verbal cues online reduce inhibition and alleviate anxiety, leading people to disclose more than they would offline (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Stern, 1999; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Walther, 1996). Others noted that youth divulged private information on personal web pages through their motivations to express themselves and receive self-validation (Stern, 1999; 2004).

Like personal web pages, social networking sites also encourage users to express who they are on their profile. However, the profile is displayed in relation to a "publicly articulated social network" (boyd, 2006) that overlaps with a user's offline network (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008), but is also larger than one's offline social network (Acar, 2008). The outcome of this structure is that users are communicating to many different kinds of people of various intimacy levels in their social lives all at once (boyd, 2007). Studies find reduced inhibition and increased self-disclosure to friends on social networking sites in order to garner feedback on self-displays (Valkenburg et al., 2006), especially when friends are in frequent communication with one another (Sheldon, 2009). Many users disclose personal details such as their romantic relationship status and political views to this broad audience of "friends." A substantial proportion of users, however, also set their profiles to public, opening them to an undefined and unknown audience (Jones & Soltren, 2005; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Stutzman, 2006; Thelwal, 2008). Youth's desires for self-promotion compete with privacy concerns (Tufekci, 2008). Indeed, the more users are motivated to use social networking sites for impression management, the more likely they are to have less restrictive privacy settings (Utz & Kramer, 2009).

These data on self-presentation and social networking sites fit well with Burhmeister and Prager's (1995) model for self-disclosure; their model posits that adolescents reveal personal information in order to resolve identity issues through peer appraisals. Self-presentation has a connection to the real self (Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Schmukle, Egloff, & Gosling, 2010). Young people use the sites for greater access to the opinions of an expanded pool of peers concerning aspects of their identities that are still in the realm of "possible selves" (Manago et al., 2008; Siibak, 2009; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2008). We know that social networking site communications are different from face-to-face interactions: not only are they disembodied; they are also more public and resonate for longer periods of time (boyd, 2007). However, little is known about how the exigencies of social networking sites change the modes of communication youth use to explore these possible selves, gauge peer opinions and build a consolidated identity. This qualitative study examines actual social networking site interactions and users' reflections on these interactions in order to document the digital language for self-disclosure and self-representation that is emerging on social networking sites and to explore how this language and these interactions might impact identity development.

## **MySpace**

Invented in 2003, MySpace expanded and became popular because it encouraged bands and club promoters to network and commercially advertise within its website (boyd & Ellison, 2007). MySpace had been the leading social networking site in the U.S. until it was overtaken by Facebook in 2009, but it still has about 70 million users (Comscore, 2010). MySpace users tend to be younger than Facebook users; those under the age of 24 comprise 44% of the MySpace audience whereas those under the age of 24 comprise 27% of the Facebook audience (Comscore, 2010). Among college-bound high school seniors, 75% have a profile on at least one social networking site (College Board and Art & Science Group, 2009).

The MySpace environment offers access to media such as music, videos and advertisements (boyd, 2007; Vie, 2008). Participants can access bulletins from favorite bands, receive advertisements on movies, post videos and play their favorite music to their online friends. Although there is a wide array of social networking sites that emphasize different themes (e.g. Facebook, originally intended for college students), MySpace emphasizes a media-enriched environment. The new tools and circumstances offered in this media-enriched environment create a new kind of cultural context for the social interactions of youth and their expressions of identity.

*The profile.* Like many other social networking sites, MySpace offers users a chance to profile themselves. Users showcase who they are to other users within the MySpace network by customizing their own web page. This page can be considered a digital description of users, including for example, their interests, favorite movies, relationship status, and occupation. The profile also publicly displays a participant's social network, articulating to other users with whom one associates (boyd et al., 2007). Profiles can be elaborately designed and media saturated, fusing together forms of media with the social milieu of the network. Tools such as "Pimp your profile" allow users to express themselves with colorful and thematic layouts.

Over time, a MySpace user usually accumulates a large number of "friends" who have instant access to the user's profile and personal information described above. The term "friend" on MySpace refers to another online user with

whom one may or may not have an offline relationship. Although there is a good amount of overlap between users' offline and online networks (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), users accumulate larger social networks online (Acar, 2008) and many users acquire "friends" on social networking sites with whom they may have a distant relationship or have never met offline (Gross, Acquisti, & Heinz, 2005).

*Comment wall.* A distinct feature of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook is the comment wall. Comments are public messages between users. They persist through time on the profile unless the user chooses to remove them, but often comments aggregate into a large electronic pile of social exchanges. In this sense the comment wall can be considered a social timeline as anyone in the user's network can scroll down the comments and view a user's past social interactions on the site. Comments from "friends" can come in the form of still images or other media, such as videos uploaded by participants themselves. Virtually no research has examined actual comment-wall exchanges and so we focus on this aspect of social networking sites here.

*Photo albums.* Users may upload photos of themselves in order to broadcast them to their broader social network. Photos may function as a tool of self-presentation, as users must negotiate the decision of what photos to broadcast to articulate themselves visually (Siibak, 2009). Feedback from peers on these photo displays has been shown to predict adolescents' self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Because research has found that photos are an important way for users to portray themselves, assess peer opinions and construct a sense of self (Manago et al., 2008; Siibak, 2009; Valkenburg et al., 2006, Zhao et al., 2008), we explore the way they are utilized as a communication tool for identity construction.

### **Visual modes for self-presentation**

Users may be constructing new visual symbols and a new language code within online environments to meet the need of presenting a desired identity to peers. Computer mediated tools, such as social networking sites, require, develop, and build upon the cognitive ability to construct iconic spatial representations. This cognitive ability is developed through computer technologies such as action video games (Greenfield, 1993; Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield, & Gross, 2001), which shift representational styles from verbal to more iconic (Greenfield, Camaioni, Ercolani, Weiss, Lauber, & Perucchini, 1994). These shifts provide a foundation for the visual environment of social networking sites. Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) found that users in chat rooms adapt written language to the new medium, creating new codes and symbols as a means for identity representation. However, chat rooms do not have visual images as part of their toolkit. In this study, we explore how the multimedia environment of social networking adds a new visual language for representing the self.

### **This Study**

Through guided tours of MySpace profiles, we explored the two main features of the social networking site that are used to communicate online identity: photos and comment wall. During the tours, participants were asked to interpret their own profiles, thus providing insights into their actual psychological experiences of online identity constructions. Qualitative analysis of these interpretive tours enabled us to address our major question: What is the new multimedia language of identity formation utilized on social networking sites?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Ten UCLA undergraduates, five male and five female, participated in this study. Only active registered MySpace users 18-22 years of age were asked to participate. The mean age of the sample was 20. Participants signed up to the study through an online website, Experimentix. Experimentix includes students from a wide variety of backgrounds and is open to all UCLA psychology students. Our multiethnic sample, typical of UCLA, comprised two Latinos, four Middle Eastern Americans, two European Americans, and two Asian Americans. The average number of MySpace "friends" our participants reported having was 225.

#### **Procedure**

A male interviewer interviewed male participants; a female interviewer interviewed female participants. Same sex interviews were conducted in order to ensure that the participants spoke freely about their profiles and refrained from the self-presentation concerns inherent in mixed-sex communication (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981). We therefore thought that participants would feel more comfortable talking to people of their own gender. Each participant gave a tour of his or her MySpace profile and was guided by questions (see below) to reflect on the meaning of profile elements and behaviors.

The tour was videotaped in such a way that each successive profile element was visible in the video record. The video recorded the exact images participants presented and these images were coupled with personal narrative to give the footage context and meaning. Participants were not seen on camera; the camera was positioned to capture only the profile screen and voice narrative of the participant. For purposes of analysis, video recordings were transferred onto Inqscribe, a software program that enables video clips to be transcribed and coded for analysis.

The interview session began with the participant being seated in front of a computer located in a comfortable small UCLA meeting room. The interview took anywhere from 30-90 minutes depending on how much a participant chose to disclose. After collecting demographic information, the interviewer elicited more details concerning the content of the participant's profile page. The specific features included on the video were photos, the comment wall, participants' personalized descriptions of self in the "about me" section, background scheme of the profile, and blogs. Overall, photos and the comment wall were some of the most popular and elaborate features participants reported using on MySpace. These were the subjects of our present analysis.

We began the interview with general questions such as:

1. *Do you have your profile set to public or private?*
2. *What kinds of photos do you put up on your page?*
3. *How has your profile changed over time?*

While these types of general question were asked of all participants, many others were spontaneous reactions to particular profile features. Thus, all interviews by nature were tailored to fit the participant. For example, if a participant said a photo featured her with her best friend, the interviewer would have asked what was happening when the photo was taken, why she chose to post the photo, and what she thinks about when she sees the photo. In the discourse results below, the eliciting questions are included. In general, interviews moved from general questions to follow-up questions such as:

1. *Why did you post this picture under your "interests" section?*
2. *Did you comment back in response to this comment?*
3. *Why do you think she wrote this comment to you?*

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003), a detailed analysis of case studies used to elucidate how the individual's understands a given phenomenon, was utilized to capture how emerging adults use MySpace tools to construct their personal sense of self. Our analytic strategy was to capture instances of self-presentation utilizing the tools of photos, multimedia, and public discourse. Because of their relevance to our subject, we restricted our analysis to the comment wall, photos section, and any image on the profile. Following the form of the social networking environment, our analytic quest brought us to self-presentation in the form of cues and signals rather than text-based information. The goal was to delineate examples of identity construction and self-presentation via visual and multimedia forms.

## **Results and Discussion**

We identified three themes concerning the multimedia tools used to convey identity information in the course of online social interaction.

**Theme 1:** *Connections with others are displayed and solidified through visual metaphors.* MySpace users communicate their relationship to others in a public fashion through visual images. As the following examples show, the image may be in the form of a metaphor or inside joke and can be used to foster a relationship between users. Because users' social networks are publicly displayed in relation to their profile (boyd, 2006), one's relationships may be a prominent way to represent the self on social networking sites (Donath & boyd, 2004; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008).

**Example 1:** Jane, a Latina participant, shows that her boyfriend posted an image of a Jolly Rancher candy on her wall (Figure 1) at the beginning of their relationship as a metaphor of his affection for her.



Figure 1. Screen shot of Jolly Rancher picture with a text message above the image on Jane's comment wall. The picture on the left is the main profile picture of her boyfriend, which represents who is leaving the message on Jane's wall. The profile picture her boyfriend uses to represent himself displays the couple in an embrace (faces blocked to conceal identity).

INTERVIEWER: Is there [any comment] in particular that is significant or interesting to you?

JANE: There's one on top. He always compares me to a Jolly Rancher. He said that a Jolly Rancher tastes so good that you can't get enough of it. So with me, he always loves spending time with me and can't get enough of me.

He establishes his affection and commitment to her on a public level through the candy metaphor as well as in his display of the relationship in the profile photo that represents him. Meanwhile, a member of the couple's social network (who has access to the virtual public displays of their affection) posts a found image (Figure 2) on Jane's wall referring to the couple's offline Halloween costumes as a doctor and nurse. Here, the friend uses the found image to extend the visual metaphor of their Halloween costumes in order to produce a comment on the relationship of Jane to her boyfriend. This postmodern recycling of an image is used to express a positive evaluation of their relationship.



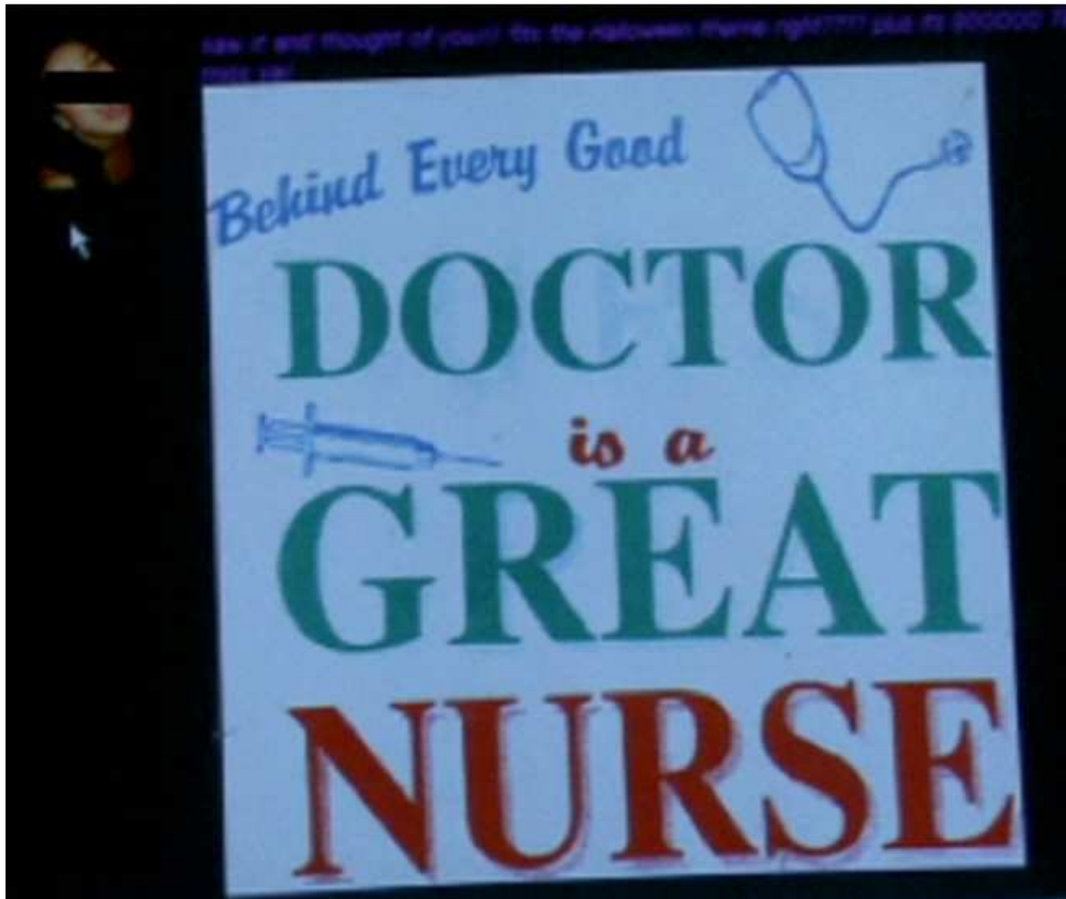


Figure 2. Image comment left on Jane's wall by her friend. The nurse is in reference to Jane, and the doctor is in reference to Jane's boyfriend. The friend writes under the image, "plus it's so true."

INTERVIEWER: "Plus it's so true..." What does she mean by that, "so true"? In general or [is she referring] to you guys?

JANE: She would always compliment our relationship, I guess, like "You guys are so cute together!"

The doctor-nurse icon symbolizes peer endorsement of the relationship and helps to construct the reality of the quality of the relationship literally with the use of the word "true". As social affirmation of the relationship takes on an iconic, public, and semi-permanent form, the legitimacy and value of the relationship may be further integrated into Jane's social identity.

In fact, the couple may have been trying on the relationship as part of their social identity in these online displays of their connection for their social network. Seeing themselves displayed visually on a public level and receiving positive feedback from their peers was an intermediate stage in their relationship. Evidence for this comes from Jane, who confirms that the virtual visual exchange transformed into more personal exchanges and direct communication in the offline world.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think him posting things like this [comments], do you think it adds to your relationship or changes your relationship or kind of influences the way you think about your relationship?

JANE: Now, [we don't comment] so much because we talk on a daily basis.

Online communication provides a tool to reinforce a relationship from a safe distance. In the beginning of the relationship the couple communicated online, in time they decreased their online communication and increased their offline interactions.

In these examples, images are being incorporated to develop the relationship with minimal reliance on text-based online communication. In this way, users employ images to initiate or develop relationships with other users. Through this relatively public communication, the audience may be used as a means to enhance the performance value of the online discourse. Thus public expressions are available to be reinforced by the virtual community, as shown by Jane's friend and her posts. Note that development of a romantic relationship, which used to be private, has become more public.

**Example 2:** Mona, another Latina participant, exchanges digital photo images as comments with a friend (Figure 3).

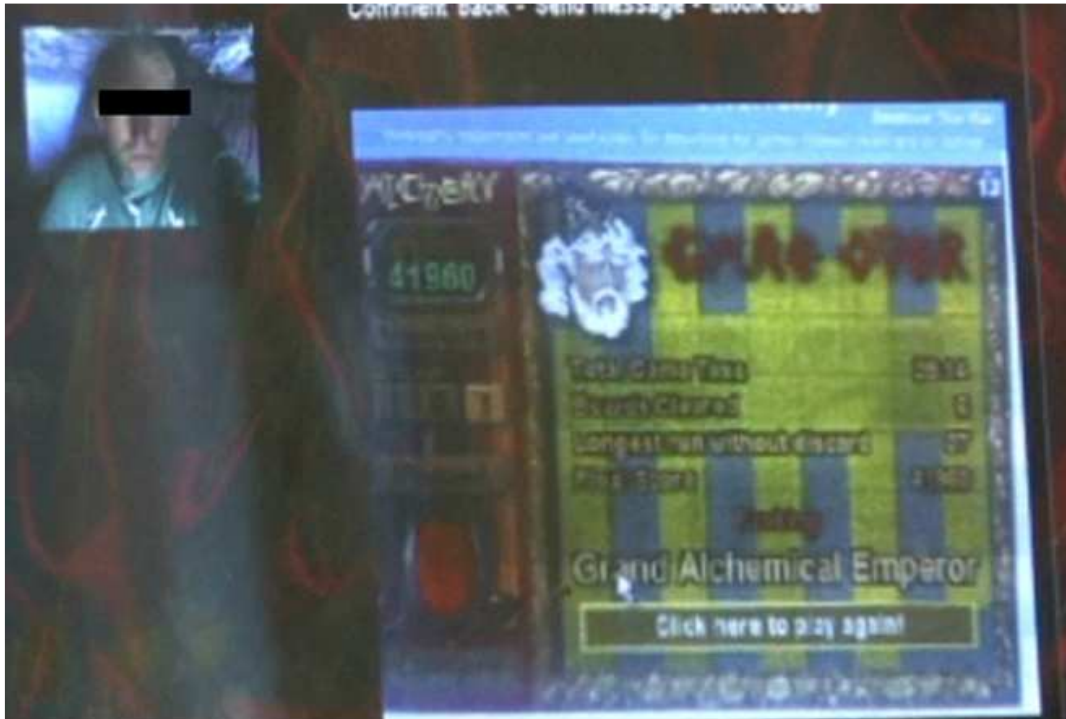


Figure 3. Screen shot of comment left by Mona's friend Ryan. The comment is a picture of his score on the game Alchemy. In addition to the comment on the right side of the screen is Ryan's MySpace profile picture on the left (eyes blocked to conceal identity).

INTERVIEWER: What are the [comments] that you responded to? What are the interesting comments on here?

MONA: So this guy Ryan, I was seeing him over the summer and we had this game that we always played, it's called Alchemy and it's an online game. We always tried to top each other's score and you want to get to Master Alchemist, and so on MySpace, we would comment back to each other and take pictures of the screen like whenever we passed each other; and my friend Kelly, when she had her MySpace, looked at this and then she got into Alchemy, and she would post me her scores but on Facebook. So I think that there are several comments from him just on Alchemy and I think on his wall I had put...Alchemy for Dummies for the stupid Mr. Ryan something something, and I put "you can learn a few things from a girl." And so I posted that on his wall. So it took me a while to create but thought it was an excellent comment post. Since then I've blocked him...he wanted me to live with him and I said no. And he got mad at me and I was like 'don't need that' so block.

Video games between players usually take place in a private forum but instead these two users publicly display their scores and their connection to each other. This virtual exchange of visual communication ties both users together in an ongoing battle of winning a game while other users watch. The public nature of the interaction is salient to Mona as she takes the time to publicly humiliate her friend Ryan in a way that makes her look good. The public context of their interaction intensifies Mona's gestures, as Ryan tries to move the relationship to another level.

Seeing oneself as part of a relationship symbolized in iconic form is integrated into the self. In the video game competition Mona expresses a sense of herself as an adversarial competitor. Through the candy example, Jane sees herself as part of a romantic relationship where her boyfriend can't get enough of her. Interestingly, the relationship in which Mona experiences her sense of self as an adversary declines, whereas the relationship in which Jane experiences her sense of self as a subject of a suitor's desire blossoms.

**Theme 2:** Through photos, users create a visual narrative of social identities connecting past to present social selves. Storytelling is an important method for constructing the self (McAdams, 1993) and recounting personal memories aids identity consolidation (Thorne, 2000). Social networking sites provide tools for personal story telling, in visual iconic forms.

**Example 1:** Graffin, a European American participant, displays a photo of his very first college roommates on his MySpace online album (Figure 4). The photo marks a point in time capturing a set of social relationships and significant events.



Figure 4. Graffin pictured with his college roommates. Picture is displayed on his MySpace photo album.

*INTERVIEWER: Pick five [photos] that are most significant to you.*

*GRAFFIN: [This was] the first time I had roommates, first time I had a home; and you know these are cool guys. I'm glad to have met them. I try to keep in touch with them but we are all busy with our own stuff.*

This photo and Graffin's comments indicate that Graffin utilizes the social networking site to visually narrate his relational sense of self across time. He is able to display a significant moment in his life, the rite of passage into college, through images of his friendships at the time. The image serves as a reminder of the bonds that he once had and his social identity as a college freshman. Despite current changes in those relationships, he chooses to maintain the display of these friendships to his social network, providing a narrative of his social connections across different periods of his life. Though he does not communicate often with his college roommates any more, the virtual representation of the friendship perpetuates his identification and bond with them, thus bringing his social identities of the past into the present, creating a history of relationships that give definition to his current sense of self.

**Example 2:** Stan, a Middle Eastern American, is a college student but displays an old high school photo of him and his friend in Halloween costumes (Figure 5).





Figure 5. Stan and a friend dressed in Halloween costumes. Picture displayed on Stan's MySpace album.

*INTERVIEWER: Pick five [photos] and we'll talk about it.*

*STAN: Basically we dressed up for our Halloween at school...and that was just one of my favorite memories of high school just that day was so unbelievably amazing and one of our friends had a really nice camera and took a picture of us and sent it over, so I put that one up because that will definitely be a lasting memory in my life.*

Here is the transformation of immaterial, abstract memories into digital, physical memories [the images and digital photos]. This online documentation makes the memory or event readily available for reflection and elaboration in the present. In this way, the past becomes quite real at any time and therefore can persist in the lives of the user and the audience with whom the user is sharing the digital memory. With the photo remaining a semi-permanent record on his profile, it archives events and associations helping to establish one's consistent identity through time.

**Example 3:** Tasha, a Middle Eastern American participant, displays pictures on her MySpace profile of her, two years ago on the beach with a friend (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Screen shot of a slide show on Tasha's MySpace page.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you decide to put this on your MySpace?

TASHA: Yeah, we were really bored and we decided to go sell lemonade on Huntington Beach like two years ago. Yeah people look at it...laugh...and, I don't know, good memories I guess. See it brings back laughs...right now...I haven't seen this for awhile...the stress-free days...Going on MySpace, I could say that a lot of people put pictures up that they are like posing...like their models...or like whatever...and that's their personality I guess. I'm more like goofy slash I'm not putting pictures up to show off my looks or anything like that to people. It's more like for laughs.

As Tasha reflects upon this particular set of photos she laughs and says "see it brings back laughs right now" demonstrating that, indeed, the experience is relived in the present. Through the persistence of these social images on MySpace, users can elaborate on particular memories to their larger social network, solidifying those moments as characterizations of their social identity. As Tasha reflects on these whimsical pictures from her past, the photos reaffirm a sense of herself as a "goofy person" and in this way she is able to create a coherent narrative of who she is. The juxtaposing of past/present photos and these quotes above suggest that these participants are using visual images to create continuity in their social identity over time, as well as a time-line of their life.

**Theme 3:** Image branding becomes part of identity construction in multimedia representations of the self. Research has documented that youth identify with popular media images on social networking sites to express who they are (Pempek et al., 2009). The following examples demonstrate various ways youth, as they incorporate popular media into representations of the self, increasingly conflate impression management with creation of self as a brand.

**Example 1:** On her MySpace account, Leslie, a Chinese American participant, gives her location as Japan and markets herself as a Japanese fashion icon to obtain professional modeling jobs. The modeling photos she posts portray female childhood, a popular fashion image that a subgroup of Japanese women aspires to (Figure 7). In addition, through the interface MySpace provides, she displays a particular group of friends who market the same fashion image. When Leslie displays these Japanese fashion model friends in the "Top Friends" section of her profile to her larger social network and exchanges comments with them publicly on her comment wall, she is creating her commercial identity through associations, utilizing social verification to substantiate the truth of the commercial image she is cultivating. Note too that MySpace enables her to construct a false geographical location as part of her commercial identity.



Figure 7. Example of Japanese fashion model taken from the web that is similar to the participant's modeling pictures. Actual participant did not give permission to publish her photos, even with her identity concealed.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think these photos say something about who you are?

LESLIE: Yes because I guess I try not to show I'm Chinese or Taiwanese because it doesn't fit with the image that I'm going for, and no pictures of me studying no... nothing like that, just to push out my image.

INTERVIEWER: So this is very different from your offline world?

LESLIE: I feel like there's two identities sometimes...

Leslie says that on her Facebook account she gives her college location and uses it for personal purposes, but uses MySpace to create a second identity, with the goal of marketing a distinct commercial self. Leslie talks about her virtual representation on MySpace as "pushing out an image" for commercial purposes and then says she feels like she has "two identities", indicating that social networking also allows the creation of dual identities.

Although Leslie may be a more extreme example, other participants in our study demonstrate that youth identify with commercial products, especially music and famous people, to express who they are, blurring the lines between impression management and commercialism in more subtle ways.

**Example 2:** Derick, an Asian American participant, uses commercially available music on his profile to present himself.

DERICK: When I used to change songs a lot, I guess I put songs that matched me.

INTERVIEWER: Matched you in what way?

DERICK: Like what I'm feeling, or what I'm going through, just what I am.

Rather than articulating his feelings himself, Derick borrows concepts from popular music to broadcast moods and feelings that represent who he is to his social network. The integration of self and multimedia is clear when he states



the songs match “just what I am”. Youth have long identified with music to express their identities; however, the media enriched environment of social networking sites makes tools for adopting media into one’s self displays so accessible that the practice may be even more pervasive in the daily lives of youth. Further, we can see how this tool of using music to express oneself also engenders increased self-disclosure; Derick changes songs to reveal, albeit indirectly, personal information about his moods to an entire audience of friends.

**Example 3:** Graffin showcases a music video on his profile for members of his network to watch and listen (Figure 8).

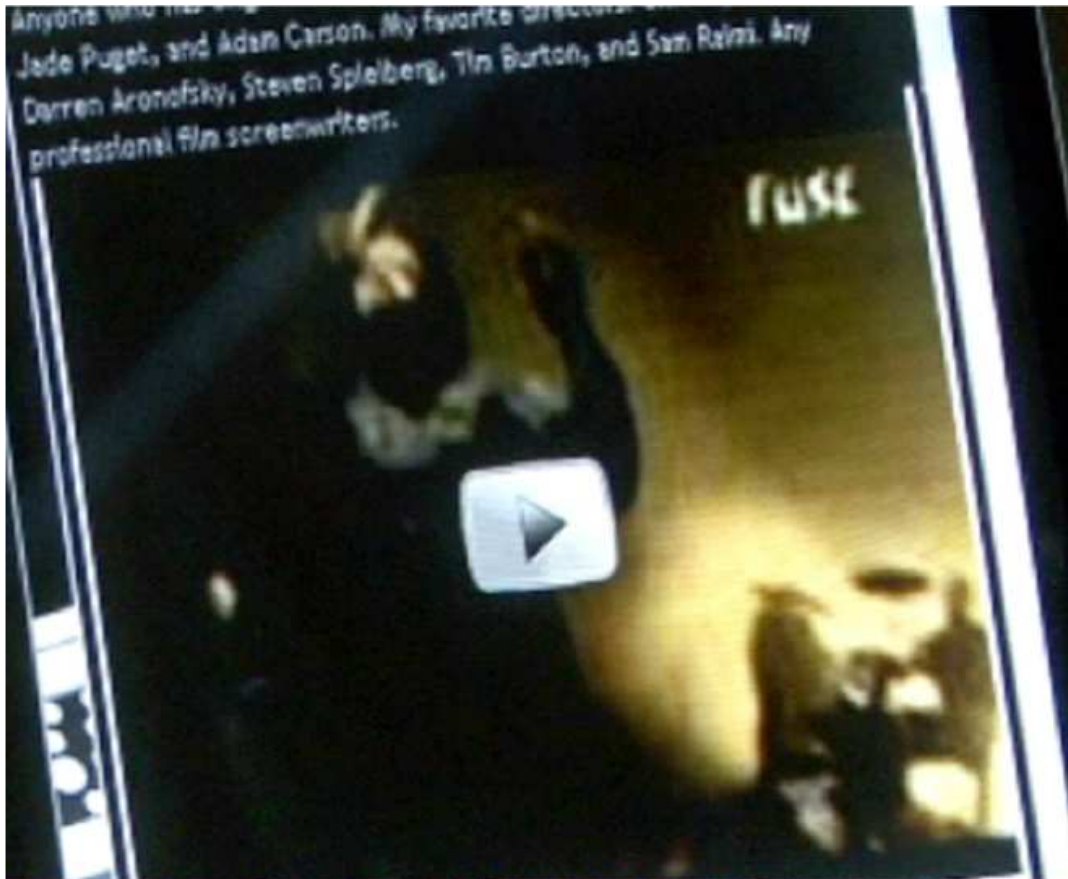


Figure 8. Video on Graffin’s MySpace page under the heading “Who I would like to meet.”.

*INTERVIEWER:* So what do you have on here?

*GRAFFIN:* It kind of reiterates what I state in my About Me, I’m a vegetarian and environmentalist and when I have the time I’m very active with that and the music video was actually banned from television because of how graphic it is with its depictions of animal cruelty and deforestation and stuff like that and also it’s one of my favorite bands. It’s a good song and also it just illustrates something I’m passionate about.

The video is meant to give a message about deforestation and animal cruelty, and Graffin uses it to tell others about himself, what he is interested in, and what he is passionate about. Complex and multifaceted aspects of who he is can be amalgamated in a multimedia commercial product, and this media image facilitates disclosure to his entire network of a great deal of personal information including his political views. Multimedia tools allow people to represent themselves in such aggregated forms, lending itself to construction of self in concise iconic images. At the same time, he is also demonstrating his taste preference in musical genres to his social network, thus signaling another message about himself through a category of commercial product. This example illustrates how multimedia forms of commercial products are seeping into the sense of self as Graffin speaks about the video and himself interchangeably.

**Example 4:** Graffin uses as his main profile picture a recent photo (Figure 9) taken at a concert with his favorite disc jockey.

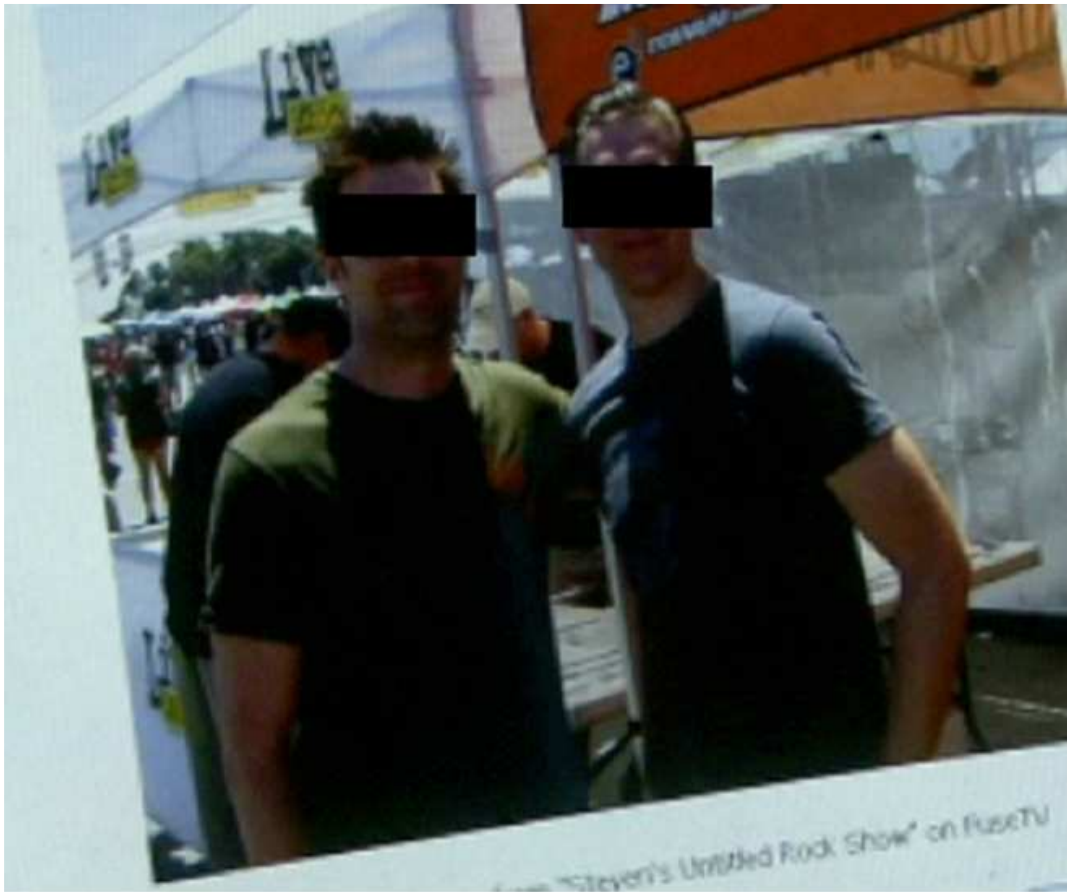


Figure 9. Graffin pictured with disc jockey.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get any responses or reactions [regarding the picture]?

GRAFFIN: I had a lot of comments [regarding the picture]. Like we look like we [the disc jockey and Graffin] could be related. That's awesome because a lot of people I know watch that network and that channel [the disc jockey's radio station].

Graffin explores an aspect of his identity by publicly posting a visual image of his association with a high status media figure, garnering positive feedback from his network of friends, and then deriving positive feelings from the self-display. Interestingly, as Graffin reflects on the photos and his friends' responses, he chooses to highlight comments about him being related to the disc jockey together with talking about the disc jockey's fame, revealing his desire to incorporate the fame and public brand of this disc jockey to the greatest extent possible into his own identity. The photo and Graffin's reflections also demonstrate how the process of peer feedback on public self-presentations may legitimize explorations of possible selves, helping users to further incorporate desired selves into their identities.

## Conclusions

We have identified innovative approaches to expressing identity and presenting the self within the public space of an online social forum. This shared social space, coupled with disembodied communication, offers a unique way of socializing. Because identity consistency is important in constructing a coherent self, online communication encourages and requires new and innovative ways of signaling identity. The medium of social networking sites may actually aid identity consistency, offering a place to store important events of a person's life and communicate links between past and current selves. Autobiographical stories shared and reflected on are used to maintain a coherent identity (McLean, Pasupathis, & Pals 2007). The virtual space becomes real as collective experience is stored in it and reflected upon.

The examples in this study also show that visual images dispense encoded information that is understood among users. When youth publicly display themselves, peers legitimize the images through public comments, and the information is made permanent and real, magnifying the meaning and gestures behind the image. This process enables users to convey elaborate messages within each image. In this way, emerging adults are adapting the multimedia online props offered by a virtual environment to convey elaborate messages about their selves.

Our analysis suggests that use of social network sites makes relationship communication more iconic and less verbal. Icons are utilized as metaphors, inside jokes, and representations of past history. These displays constitute the new language of the information age. Images become digital cultural products that take on social and relational significance within the online domain. Confirming previous studies (Pempek et al., 2009; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008), our data suggest that photos have become a primary mechanism for self-presentation on social networking sites.

Indeed, MySpace is a multimedia environment. Popular music and videos are integrated in self-presentation to broader



audiences and in the process may be fused into one's sense of self. Users employ preferences and tastes in mass media in order to articulate a "cultural identity" (Zhao et al., 2008). Visuals and multimedia representations are functional as identity representations in the online environment of disembodied communication. Moreover, the availability of these multimedia tools gives MySpace users a way to market themselves by constructing a second commercial identity. Turkle (1995) noted the ability to play with identities in online forums. Here, however, all identities are real rather than make-believe, unlike Turkle's examples. As youth present themselves in these media enriched environments alongside commercial products, brands, and celebrity omnipresent on the Internet, they may be increasingly constructing aspects of their identities as images or brands, thereby erasing the line between commerce and the self.

Social networking sites make interaction more impersonal, with visual imagery and music compensating for decreased physical identity cues (e.g. facial expressions and tone of voice). Iconic imagery and music allow for greater compensation than was possible with the restriction to written communication in chat rooms or bulletin boards, relatively early environments for social networking in a public space (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003). With the indirectness and ambiguity an image presents, participants risk less in initiating new relationships or making old ones more intimate. They are able to send visual icons to each other as convenient substitutes for conversation. Though images are utilized to communicate elaborate messages in the online realm, images are also ambiguous and may encapsulate a broad range of meanings.

At the same time, the tools available on social networking sites for self-presentation seem to encourage self-disclosure in the interest of promoting a desired image (Tufekci, 2008). A young man publicly reveals his intimate feelings for his new girlfriend through photos and visual metaphors to establish his connection to her in his relational identity; other young men disclose their personal moods and political views through music and media; and a young woman reveals a series of silly photos with friend at the beach in an effort to promote her sense of self as "goofy" in contrast to the stereotypical "glamour girl" on MySpace. Through these examples, we can see how emerging adults are negotiating a fine line between concerns for privacy and concerns for asserting who they are online. While some youth may be revealing more of themselves publicly, with research showing public self-disclosure correlated with narcissism (Buffardi & Campell, 2008) and higher numbers of online friends (Lampe, Ellison, Steinfield, 2006), others may be also utilizing visual tools and metaphors to represent themselves behind a veneer of ambiguous imagery. Youth's answer to the "privacy paradox" (Utz & Kramer, 2009) may be to employ vague images to represent the self that only a subset of their social network will understand. In this way, they can still utilize social networks to validate and manifest possible selves as social reality without sacrificing privacy.

Finally, one can imagine that with all these new tools available for constant self-presentation, disclosure and social feedback, today's youth may be hyper-focused on the development of the self and constructing hyper-elaborated identities. Concerns with the self have increased over historical time (Baumeister, 1987) such that adolescents must now struggle with self-definitions and expanded choices for adult role fulfillment (Baumeister & Tice, 1986), expanding the developmental period for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). The technological tools of today's adolescents and emerging adults are building on these concerns and further amplifying them. Invoking the terms "constant contact generation", Clark (2005) has observed that today's youth are engaged in unrelenting self-presentation contexts with peers through technologies such as social networking sites and texting. Possibly the clearest implication of social networking sites for identity development may be that they afford increased opportunities for self-exploration and elaboration, magnifying youth's concerns for defining and establishing their identities.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The profile tours of this study focused primarily on photos and the comment wall as means of communication, leaving out private email and instant messaging which could present other forms of self-presentation that might be more intimate. Also, new modes of communication called live streams, where users post status updates about themselves are increasing in popularity not only on MySpace but also on Facebook and Twitter. The streams function as one-way communication to a broad audience with minimal social interaction. It would be interesting to measure whether this new tool continues to perpetuate less direct communication between peers, placing more emphasis on broadcasting the self and encouraging increased self-disclosure to the point of narcissism (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Moreover, we still do not understand the full ramifications these expanded opportunities for self-development have for the well-being of youth; future studies should continue to examine what kinds of self-explorations online might be beneficial for youth development and the conditions under which they may be harmful.

Our case studies presented in-depth and detailed information about self-presentation among a small sample of college students; more quantitative studies with larger sample sizes would greatly increase the generalizability of our findings and answer questions regarding the extent to which ambiguous visual metaphors are utilized in self-presentations, or the extent to which youth use popular media images to construct their identities. Further, although our study provides some insights into how online peer feedback might lead users to integrate self-displays into their sense of self, longitudinal research looking at how self-concepts change over time would be better able to clarify this process. In fact, our study included only college students, individuals who are in later stages of identity development. Longitudinal studies examining profile and identity integration over time would benefit from a sample of younger adolescents who may be experiencing more dramatic shifts in self-concepts.

New means of communication with peers have created a drastically altered peer environment in which identity is constructed. While identity construction has long been a central developmental task in our society (Erikson, 1959), social networking sites require that participants adjust and adapt this task to a new technological environment. The expressions of identity become more public, more removed from face-to-face interaction, and more manifold in their possibilities. As researchers, we need to learn more about the developmental effects of these transformations.

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