

## You Look so Much Cuter on my Computer

Social networking sites are giving their users the opportunity to influence the attraction they exert on others by creating an online profile and a virtual identity that may in some cases strongly differ from real life. Through the use of social networking sites, users can not only show a multi-faced image of their identity, but they can also play with their personality and construct a new self that is freed from the physical body and an appearance in real life. With approaching social network research through the concept of online **impression management**, several studies (Haferkamp/Krämer 2008) have shown that psychological effects can be significant when understanding the impact of social networking on identity management. Thus, the investigation of profile pictures, groups, wall posts and the amount of friends that users have on platforms like Facebook might help to analyse behavioural patterns and psychological aims in using social networking.

With the installation of virtual identity, personality features such as self-esteem, credibility and physical attractiveness have not only changed in their evaluation but also in their effects on social interactions in reality. Now, how does social networking 2.0 affect behavioural patterns in real life? Are women thinking more about their impression management than men? Do users with more virtual friends have more self-esteem? Are people with more virtual friends more attractive? Or to put it differently: Is virtual identity management all about **'putting your best cyberface forward?'**



When considering social networking as a tool of impression management, its users are acting merely to give a certain impression of themselves that suit their own aims. In *The Presentation of the Self*, Erving Goffman deals with the self-portrayal of individuals and the impression they intentionally give to raise the attention of other to themselves:

*Thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey. (96)*

Furthermore, Goffman distinguishes between the impression that somebody *'gives'* by the mere act of exchanging verbal symbols and information with others and the impression somebody *'gives off'* by acting intentionally to leave a certain impression which is in the actors interest to convey.

When looking at the emergence of cyberspace identities on social networking sites, it is obvious that new communication technologies have changed the construction of identities and their perception by others. While in formerly enclosed societies, one could refer to individuals having a stable and fixed identity that is embedded in institutions such as the church, the family and the political party, nowadays individuals find themselves in a diverse and dynamically changing space which requires the adaptation to many life spaces and multiple identities. Obviously, in social networks users are capable of gaining some control on how others perceive them by choosing an individual path of presenting themselves online. However, a core question is what role their audience plays in influencing their online identity and why people make an effort at all to look good online. In researching social networks it is vital to also look beyond the individual and into the dynamics of man being part of the crowd. As Elias Canetti (1962) puts it:

*There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. [...] "it is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. (15)*

Now, when finding oneself in an open crowd of social network users, one might lose this particular fear of being "touched" and seen by others as it is only happening virtually in that very moment and one can construct their own identity as it suits them. As users of social networking sites present themselves in an open crowd of people, the fear of being too close to others might be diminished as one is moving in a secure space of friends and fans.

### **Finding a new Ego**

Finally, in the world of new media communication, identities are not solely determined by fixed environments and communities any more. Virtual environments have changed the perception of the self and the construction of identity to an extent that we nowadays speak of "multiple" selves and more flexible identities. As Stuart Hall (1996) puts it:

*We can no longer conceive of the 'individual' in terms of a whole, centered, stable and completed Ego or autonomous, rational 'self'. The 'self' is conceptualized as more fragmented and incomplete, composed of multiple 'selves' or identities in relation to the different social worlds we inhabit, something with a history, 'produced', in process. The 'subject' is differently placed or positioned by different discourses and practices. (225)*

Thus, the diversity of identities one can take over in a society that is based on communication via new media paves the way for a new understanding of every person and their identity. With researching social networking by looking at this psychological and sociological aspects of impression management, social networking can be analysed as a new way of identity construction. As taking over virtual identities has changed the way how we look at ourselves and how we act in two different worlds of the virtual and the real, a deeper investigation of behavioural patterns on social network sites might lead to a better understanding of where our identities are heading to in the future.

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## **Putting Your Best Cyberface Forward**