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## **Managing online identity and diverse social networks on Facebook**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports research that examined use of Facebook to (consciously or unconsciously) create an online identity. An online survey (N=752) was conducted during Phase 1 of the research. Results of Phase 1 informed Phase 2 where 18 active Facebook users (aged 21-57) engaged in interviews and verbal protocols. The qualitative component is reported here to give voice to active Facebook users and provide insights into the decisions that underpin their use of the Facebook site. The tools used by participants to create an online identity (or make judgments about others) are explored and include status updates, posting photographs and joining groups/pages. Data revealed adult users successfully manage their online identity and provide effective models for adolescents, particularly in relation to the management of diverse social networks where social, family and professional lives merge online.

### **Keywords**

Online social networking; Facebook; Identity construction; Impression management; Diverse social networks

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### **Introduction**

As at June 2013 the Facebook Newsroom reports 1.15 billion monthly active users and an average of 699 million daily active users, making the Facebook site a valuable authentic context through which we can investigate human behaviour. The goal of this research was to ascertain the ways in which adults use Facebook tools to present themselves online and to identify the consequences of these actions. To date there has been considerable research into adolescent and tertiary student use of online social networking sites (see, for example, Boyd, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Sabrahmanyam, Reich,

Waechter & Espinoza, 2008; Tufekci, 2010; Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006; Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans & Stefanone, 2009) and this study builds upon the existing body of knowledge by examining the experiences of a broader age range of users. Adolescents have been heralded as natural masters of new technology, the premise of this study, however, is that adult users, with their life experience, are more adept in managing their online identity in a positive manner.

The paper commences by defining *identity* (as limited for the purposes of this research) and then moves to explore the role of the Internet in providing opportunities to create and manage online identity. The research design and findings are then presented. The findings establish which tools of Facebook are used to create and manipulate one's identity and the consequences of online identity creation in relation to the management of diverse social networks within one online space.

### What is identity?

Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory capture the social nature of self established through one's positioning in society and explore the concept of multiple identities to describe the norms and roles applied to individuals (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). These two theories differ in that Identity Theory aims to explain 'role identities' such as employee, wife, mother, sister, friend, colleague. In contrast, Social Identity Theory examines group processes and intergroup relations based on one's group membership, such as nationality or political affiliation (Brown, 2000; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Discussion of human behaviour by identity theorists analyses behaviour in terms of roles, while social identity theorists speak of norms and stereotypes (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). In the context of this research, Identity Theory and the implications of role identities is of primary relevance.

Identity is a complex notion and this article, like others in the field, is interested in *social identity* as attributed to Goffman (1959) (see, for example, Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs & Bellotti, 2010; Marder, Joiner & Shanker, 2012). Goffman asserts that in different social situations, across various settings/contexts, we simultaneously attempt to manipulate and control the impression that others make of us, while actively obtaining information to draw opinions about others. This is known as *impression management*. The goal is to present a positive self by exhibiting the most desirable impression possible (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Dwyer, 2007). In some instances individuals are virtually unaware of others' reaction to them, while other contexts ensure the individual is highly cognizant that their behaviour is being analysed by their audience and impressions created (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Once motivated to create a desirable impression people alter their behaviour and monitor their performance to gauge the impressions other people form of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995).

As reflected in Table 1 below, the ways in which we perceive, present and represent ourselves has evolved over time; from pre-modern period where identity was based on social status at birth, toward an identity formed today where the individual more readily controls how he/she is perceived by others.

**Table 1. Identity - Premodern, Early Modern, Late Modern (van Halen & Janssen, 2004)**

	<b>Pre-modern</b>	<b>Early modern</b>	<b>Late modern</b>
<i>Social identity</i>	Ascribed	Achieved	Managed
<i>Personal identity</i>	Heteronomous	Individualised	Image oriented
<i>Identity criteria</i>	Loyalty to tradition	Personal unity	Expressiveness and flexibility

Social identity develops from social constructionism, whereby identity is being permanently constructed through limitless contact with people and social experiences which reinforce existing perceptions of identity or enable exploration of new facets of oneself (Abbas & Dervin, 2009). The presumption being that identity is enacted over and over through experiences and exposure to the social world, resulting in self-transformation. This study aims to contribute to our understanding of social and personal identity and identity criteria as experienced in the digital age.

### **The Internet and identity creation/impression management**

Presenting oneself online using a personal webpage, blog or social networking site requires purposeful selection of text, pictures, graphics and audio to create an impression. This is not done by chance. Miller and Arnold (2003) argue that action is required to make an individual profile and people make purposeful decisions about the ways in which they organise and classify their own actions and the actions of others. Chan (2006) described the once popular online social networking site, MySpace, as a kind of 'presencing' system - a personal presence within a social context. This notion of online presence blurs the line between individual and online space. People are the content of each online profile and each profile is standing in for the person around the clock (Chan, 2006).

Initially research into online identity focused on issues of anonymity and identity experimentation rather than examining the processes through which individuals establish and explore their own identities (Androustopoulos, 2006; Simpson, 2005; Valkenburg, Schouten & Peter, 2005). It has since been well established that sites such as Facebook require authentic representation of self. If individuals failed to do this they would be limited in accumulating online friends, making use of the site redundant.

The online world requires people to write themselves into existence and so their profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended impression through language, imagery and media. There is widespread consensus that online social networking sites are a relevant and valid means of communicating identity and exploring impression management and, indeed impression management appears to be one of the main functions of social networking sites (Boyd, 2006; Dwyer, 2007; Gosling, Gaddis & Vazire, 2007; Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010).

Eighteen years ago, Lawley (1993) (cited in Miller & Arnold, 2003 p. 77) claimed '*The web is not a new world, but an electronic reflection of the world we currently inhabit*' and consequently we can expect that online profiles reflect the aims, pressures and difficulties being experienced in the lives of the site/page creators. Online identity needs to be treated as phenomenon to be explained in terms of the dialectical relationship between online profiles and the wider social context (Miller & Arnold, 2003). While use of the Internet to explore one's identity is not new, what is unique is the immediacy of online social network communications and the interactive nature of online social networking profiles which are constructed, not by the individual alone, but through the contributions made his/her online 'friends'. These site features have the potential to alter the way in which we perceive, present and represent ourselves. Research to emerge in this field of online identity construction has explored the impact of diverse or unintended audiences, inter-generational issues, presentation of the *real self* versus the *ideal self*.

Marder, Joinson and Shankar (2012) explore the difficulty of managing the multiple audiences which exist in one's online social network and align this problem with Goffman's notion of audience segregation where traditionally people flee difficult situations by separating their audience. To investigate this issue in the online context Farnham and Churchill (2011) explored strategies used to manage the diverse online audience. They found users often had limited awareness and lacked of control over who views their online profile. Three courses of action appear to be present: acceptance of the generally public nature of online communications, censoring of personal material posted online and/or use of privacy controls available on sites such as Facebook to manage who sees online content.

Also examining the impact of multiple audiences Barker (2012) reports that there are more similarities than differences in the ways that different age groups use online social networking sites and these sites provide positive and satisfying opportunity for intergenerational and intergroup contact. While DiMicco and Millen (2007) concluded that the majority of users were not manipulating their online profiles or online behaviour to address their professional and non-professional audiences.

Online impression management and the presentation of the real versus ideal self has been explored through the use of photos (Marder, Joinson & Shankar, 2012; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Willett & Ringrose, 2008; Zhao & Elesh, 2008) and more generally in relation to wall posts and personal information (Back, Stopfer, Vazire, et al., 2010 and Mehdizadeh, 2010). Overall research examining the extent to which a real rather than idealised self was presented online suggests that the nature of online social networking encourages individuals to present an online profile which is reflective of their offline self. It is reported that relatively accurate personality impressions can be discerned through elements such as number of friends, photos, quotes and interests (Gosling, Augustine & Vazire, 2011; Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012).

## Methods

The problematic arising from identity construction and online social networking emerges from the modes of presentation enabled through these sites and the ways in which the sites merge the social worlds of its users. Several elements were explored in the research. Firstly, the social experiences of Facebook users were examined (Young, 2011) and also, the composition of online 'friends' and their online/offline relationships (Young, 2013). This paper will focus specifically on the third issue investigated: online identity construction. Two specific research questions are addressed:

- i. Which Facebook tools do adults use to construct online identity?
- ii. How do adults' diverse social networks on Facebook affect identity creation?

To canvass the experiences of online social network users an online survey was distributed. The results of this survey have been reported in detail in Young (2009). The survey results informed the design of Phase 2 of the research which is the focus of this paper. In Phase 2, Facebook users (N=18) self-selected to undertake face-to-face sessions with the researcher after completion of the Phase 1 survey. The sessions incorporated semi-structured interviews and verbal protocols (where each participant viewed their online profile while talking aloud to the researcher about its construction and contents) (see Young 2005 for detail of the think-aloud method). The sessions were captured using audio/video-screen capture software. Demographic details of the Phase 2 participants are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Phase 2 Participants**

ALIAS	GENDER	AGE	OCCUPATION
Doug	M	57	P/T Self-employed economist
Christine	F	37	F/T (not stated)
Elanor	F	37	P/T Personal assistant
Mia	F	37	F/T Homemaker
Alison	F	36	F/T Homemaker
Jason	M	35	F/T Information Technology
Leroy	M	35	F/T Graphic design
Olivia	F	35	P/T Journalist / mother
Linda	F	35	F/T Home-maker
Anna	F	33	P/T Lawyer
Nathan	M	29	F/T Lift mechanic
Natalie	F	28	F/T (not stated)
Ivan	M	28	F/T mining
Gail	F	28	F/T Admin assistant
Thomas	M	25	P/T Various
Amy	F	23	F/T University student
Elizabeth	F	21	F/T University student
Amanda	F	21	F/T University student

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data which emerged from the interviews and verbal protocols revealed: (1) Facebook users perceptions of online identity; (2) tools used for identity creation (status updates, posting photographs, joining groups/pages); (3) managing identity in a space which comprises diverse social networks.

## Results

### Adult Facebook Users Perceptions of Online Identity

Upon reflection several participants acknowledged that Facebook users consciously manipulate their online profile to present an idealised self and that profiles must be interpreted with this limitation in mind:

*A lot of it's just a bit of a façade, You know, people like to present themselves in a certain light ... some people are real, some people aren't real, it's just the nature of life that some people are going to bullshit you and some people aren't (Thomas, 25);*

*Well obviously they're all orchestrated. I mean, the creation of an image is part of joining the Facebook community. I guess it's interesting how people portray themselves (Doug, 57).*

There was a sense that Facebook provided opportunity for greater self-expression with several components of one's identity able to be explored and shared:

*It's interesting because I don't think you're ever really yourself. Like I think who you are is just kind of a combination of a bunch of different facets of yourself that you show to different people. So if anything, this [Facebook profile] is kind of more than you would see of me in person because I'm combining maybe a few different facets of myself because I do have those different groups of people on there ... it's not the whole me, but it's different parts of me that's on there (Amy, 23).*

*I think I have a lot of different personalities and yeah, Facebook is one side of me. I think in person I can be more calm, whereas on Facebook I'm a bit more loud. ... like you can just kind of more or less say whatever you want. But really it is quite an honest portrayal because I think if I added a new person like a friend of a friend, nothing in there is a lie, like even the weird stuff, that is things I would say or the way I would act. So it's not really a lie it's just probably one aspect of my personality (Amanda, 21).*

Reported in Young (2009, p. 46) 98% of online friends are known persons. As such, it is difficult to present anything other than an authentic, although idealised, self: *'I don't tend to hide any aspects of my personality. What you see is generally what you get. I fully expect my friends to loudly correct any misrepresentation of my personality on Facebook ... even though I continually tell them that I look like Brad Pitt - they still don't believe me (Jason, 35).* Also, it must be acknowledged that the Facebook site is quite restrictive as Nathan (29) highlights: *'if I was in control of my profile then my page would look a bit more different to reflect who I am'.*

The participants highlighted the value of Facebook to present aspects of their identity but acknowledged that their audience requires this to be done in an authentic way to present a self that aligns with the way they are perceived offline.

### Tools used for Online Identity Creation on Facebook

Construction of one's online identity requires appropriation of the various tools available through the Facebook site. Analysis of interview and verbal protocol data revealed that participants primarily use three tools to project an image of themselves to their online audience and/or make judgments about others. These are status updates, posting photographs and joining pages/groups.

#### Status updates

Survey data (reported in Young, 2009) revealed that 40% of respondents post status updates on their profile. When asked in an open-ended survey question why users updated their status the phrase *'express self'* was predominant. Several respondents were acutely aware of the self-absorbed nature of this activity: *'to pander to my innate need as a victim of the information age for online identity creation and self-promotion'* (anonymous survey respondent). Survey data suggested four reasons for choosing to update one's status: wanting to be witty; to keep alignment with 'real' self; a belief that others should/do want to know their feelings/activities; and, to engage friends.

The desire to appear witty and reflect offline behaviour was supported by Phase 2 participants who acknowledged: *'I try and project something that's a bit funny or clever'* (Elizabeth, 21) and *'I try and make them, I don't know, 'cause I have a really sarcastic and weird sense of humour, I try to put that in to my status'* (Amy, 23).

Status updates that reflected the audience perception of the author's real self appear more highly valued *'you have people who are really cool and they're just more themselves actually. Like I learn interesting things from my friends about their interests and stuff.'* (Amanda, 21). While, mundane status updates are not appreciated *'I don't like the ones that are sort of people just put stupid things ... Elizabeth is tired or Elizabeth is over life, I think that is stupid.'* (Elizabeth, 21); *'[people] update their status all the time about anything they're doing. Like I'm going to the beach, just got home from the beach, like really, no-one cares.'* (Olivia, 35).

#### Posting photographs

As reported (Young, 2009, p. 47) 14% of respondents update their profile picture weekly, 47% do so monthly and 14% yearly. Interpretive analysis of survey data revealed seven reasons for photo selection: looks good; projects a desired image of self; represents an occasion; includes significant other/friends; convenience; maintains some anonymity; image not oneself.

Across Phase 2 participants there was consensus that people would select a profile photo which portrayed them in their best light, and this is an acceptable practice:

*When I first started I made sure I put a silly photo on there because I didn't want to be vain ... now I might find the hottest one of myself you know, I've done my hair and everything, so that's not necessarily reflective 'cause I don't normally look that good. But then ... I mean, that's only human nature as well, so I don't think you can be ... you can really be hard on anyone for doing that. (Anna, 33);*

*I'll be honest with you, the [photos] where I think I look the best. I think most people do, yeah. The ones that catch you in the best light and so, I mean it is like a ... almost like a nicer version of yourself in a way. But I don't like to see it as like a lie because it's not, because that photo was taken and it's not like they were Photoshopped or whatever, it really is you. But you just happen to pick the nicer ones of you. (Christine, 37).*

In addition to using profile pictures to create a visual identity, interview participants acknowledged that photos are used to highlight social connection or relationship with others. Elizabeth (21) states: *'one thing that reflects me [on my profile] is my picture because that's my best friend and that's my boyfriend ... the two most important people in my life's that's pretty reflective of me'*. Similarly Amy (23) wanted to use her profile picture to make a particular relationship statement *'it's from when I went to a concert in Brisbane with my sister ... it's also to do with your relationships because my sister was about to go overseas and I wasn't going to see her for a few months, you know, she was kind of a very important issue at the time, so she became part of my profile.'* As with status updates, profile pictures can be used to present to your audience *'about what's going on in your life'* (Leroy, 35) and *'Some things you want to share like the good times or places you've been to. It's good to share, you know, your life with your online friends'* (Gail, 28).

Creating photo albums and posting photos of events, occasions and situations is also used to present desirable image of one's self. Capturing evidence of shared experiences is a means of subtly demonstrating to the audience that you are socially desirable.

Posting photographs from events is a way to connect offline social identity with the online world. In Elizabeth's (21) case the aim is not to capture a special, unique moment for prosperity, rather *'... if I go to an event I'll take lots of pictures. Usually with friends and just to show everyone you know what a good time we had'*. Similarly, Alison (36) claims *'it's all about the photos and seriously every single social event you've got an album for every single one'*.

The purpose of taking photographs appears to have transitioned from the traditional goal of capturing a special moment for future reminiscence to valuing the immediacy of posting photographs online to demonstrate your social acceptability and elicit comments from online friends.

Judgements about one's character are made based on the photographs someone chooses to post. Three participants each identified an online friend who posted provocative pictures. In two of these instances the person posting the photographs was a close offline friend and so not judged negatively:



*I think there's some people ... the pictures that they post sometimes reflects them. Some people post photos and they've obviously taken them themselves and they're like trying to do like a sexy pose or like make them look hot, and they put it up there and like I think you took that photo yourself so you can post it on there so people will think like oh wow she looks pretty or you know he looks hot, I just think ... and a lot of the time it reflects like ... it reflects them like you know that they're actually like that so you're like well yeah, well you know that's them (Elizabeth, 21);*

*Like I have a friend who's very ... she's just always been very into her image and she's not a superficial person, that's just kind of what she does for fun. And you can see it in her profile that the only photos she's got on there of herself are posing. And yeah, to an outsider that might actually look like she's a really superficial person, but because I know her, that's just part of who she is (Amy, 23).*

In contrast, in the third example, the person in question was no longer in the participant's social circle and was held up for greater criticism for posting provocative pictures:

*Oh, she's so funny, she makes me laugh. I haven't seen her since ... she left in Year 8 or Year 9 to go back to Yugoslavia and that's her now. She looks like a porn star and I think she'd had implants and apparently she hosts MTV style show in Yugoslavia and she has become the ultimate trash bag ... whore, like she looks quite trashy, honestly ... I kind of felt like it was almost as if she wanted to say look at me now, like look how hot I am now (Amanda, 21).*

Tagging people in pictures posted on Facebook informs mutual friends of the existence of a set of photos. It is possible for people in the picture to de-tag themselves from the picture. This process of tagging and de-tagging provides another avenue for identity interpretations. When an unflattering picture is posted there are two choices, you can leave the photo, suggesting some level of personal confidence:

*There are also a lot of photos, some put on by me, some by others ... not all are entirely ideal but I have left these on as I figured it was how I looked at that point in time and they were choosing to put these up on their own profile, linking to mine. Certainly if there was something I thought outrageous or inappropriate, I would remove it (Jason, 35);*

*I've never de-tagged myself ... there might be ugly photos where I don't look too good, but I'm not that vain that I'll de-tag myself (Natalie, 28).*

Alternatively, a person can de-tag an unflattering photo and this is considered to reflect a more image conscious person: '*... I've done it myself, it's kind of a vanity thing. You go through the photos that people have tagged of you or you know, you don't tag yourself in photos or you don't look very good*' (Amy, 23) and '*Just remove the tag, especially if it's a horrible picture of you ... They've sort of been like shockers, so I'll be like remove, that's not me.*' (Gail, 28).

Smartphone technologies have fundamentally changed the nature of the 'snapshot'. Photos are no longer private possessions carefully stored in albums and shared face-to-face with select family and friends. Individuals now have the ability to take unlimited photos, posting them immediately online without time delay. The public and interactive nature of online photo-sharing ensures they are one of the most significant sources of identity construction online. It is important to note here that one person does not control this visual representation of identity, it is a collective identity built through diverse interactions with a broad range of offline social groups.

### **Joining groups/pages**

Another feature of Facebook which participants used (whether consciously or not) to project an image is joining groups and/or pages 'likes'. Facebook users are able to create pages or groups which are designed to gather together people with a common interest. They can be based around a celebrity, hobby, social activity, activist group, education group, reunion, location, in memoriam and so on. Groups/pages can be serious or fun and are now commonly established by organisations and corporations to promote and market their business and/or activities and maintain a constant presence in the lives of their client base.

Data revealed an evolution in the joining of groups. Originally, people felt an obligation to join all the Facebook groups suggested by friends: *'Initially, not understanding the concept, I used to add all or most that were recommended to me. This, in a short time, became a nuisance to do because you get so many and so many that you are potentially not interested in'* (Christine, 37) and *'At first I didn't understand the whole concept and people would send you invites to join a group and I'd like go okay because you didn't know, I didn't know whether it would be a bad reflection'* (Thomas, 25).

Over time, these Facebook users realise the pointlessness of joining numerous pages/groups and are becoming more selective: *'It's [joining groups] increasingly less random, I'm much more selective about what I do now, what I am being part of ... I don't join anything that I don't feel passionate about, and I probably should cull a little, the old ones'* (Thomas, 25).

There is recognition however, that choosing to join a group sends a message to your audience: *'I guess it's a way of showing your different interests and that's why I do it ... I think when you first join it you're saying to people, I like this person or this group ...'* (Anna, 33) and *'I mean consciously or unconsciously you're always saying something about yourself by what you choose to either be involved in, if you join it, cause you obviously think it is an issue ... the group thing, it's a forum for people's ideas, to stand together for whatever they want'* (Thomas, 25).

The primary purpose for joining a group was to let the online world know you are interested. Once joined participants revealed that they did not actively participate in the group: *'It's just kind of a way to express yourself by having these groups, not to actually contribute to the group, but having them there kind of tells people a little bit about you'* (Amy, 23). Some participants questioned the point of this action: *'I feel like when people join causes on Facebook just for the sake of it, it annoys me because it's not really going to do anything. It's just showing people you are interested, what's the point'* (Amanda, 21) and *'I used to join them ... but now I sort of think*

*like well what does it matter if I join this cause or join this group, it doesn't really mean anything to me and I'm not going to do anything about it outside of this Facebook website' (Elizabeth, 21).*

Traditionally, in the face-to-face context, joining causes or organisations was a private action viewed only by other attendees. Today, social media represents these associations publically. Reviewing a person's choices of Facebook group membership can provide insights into facets of their identity. Although these interpretations may be very misleading if a person has not been selective or purposeful in joining online groups.

Analysis of the use of Facebook tools (status updates, photos and groups/pages) revealed that issues arise in trying to manage the diverse social networks comprising one's online profile. These identity related issues are unique to Facebook (and other similar social networking sites) and not necessarily present in offline interactions.

### **Managing identity in a space comprised of diverse online social networks**

As reported previously (Young, 2013) Phase 2 participant Olivia (35) suggests the composition of her online friends is "... similar to the 'outside' world, if you like, you have people who are acquaintances, then people you are closer to and consider friends, and even amongst them people who are in your inner circle. The same structure exists in Facebook". This represents a mix of one's offline social world, comprised of peers, family and work colleagues. In face-to-face interactions there is generally little overlap between the members of these various groups, In the online context these groups merge into one set of online friends. The integration of people from multiple areas of one's life raises concerns, particularly in relation to the inclusion of family members and work colleagues having access to a generally social environment.

To address the integration of social, family and work circles self-censorship emerged as a predominant theme to overcome potential problems by both younger adult participants (Thomas, 25; Amy, 23; Elizabeth, 21) and their older counterparts:

*I think you see a sort of sanitised version of me on Facebook because I'm not going to be completely open on Facebook and I'd certainly have conversations which wouldn't appear on Facebook ... Subject matter, language would be different (Doug, 57);*

*I don't slag off about my work because potential future employers or workmates might read it and I'd be off to an awkward start. Office politics is enough of a jungle without making yourself look like a moron (Olivia, 35);*

Participants were aware that privacy setting could be utilised to limit access to parts of their online profile to specific friends but this option was not taken: "*Yeah. Like I could be all, you know, technical and smart and restrict what certain people see, but I figure it's easier just to monitor my own behaviour*" (Natalie, 28).

In some instances choosing not to adjust privacy settings was because the user did not wish to cause offence: '*to stop my photos being accessed by certain people, like my family wants to see*

*me and my friends, what I'm doing and all this stuff, and I feel that it would be insulting to put these limitations on their access to my profile, this is where all the problems lie, I mean it's how you can go about it without, you know, insulting people ... still letting them have the insights into your life that you want people to have through Facebook' (Thomas, 25).*

Lack of self-censorship is heralded as a downfall for some individuals using social media. Popular media often reports the demise of celebrities, sport persons and even politicians from poor choices in publishing status updates and photographs. The participants of this study demonstrate positive use of Facebook which could provide a catalyst for modelling good practice to adolescents and others who lack sufficient awareness of the consequences of posting inappropriate material online.

## Discussion

This study supports Mehdizadeh (2010) findings that Facebook presents a unique opportunity for a greater, or a different form, of self expression than is possible in face-to-face context. As noted by Marder, Joinson and Shankar (2012) Facebook offers users multiple tools through which to present themselves in accordance with Goffman's views of verbal/written and non-verbal communication.

The merging of offline and online worlds results in an audience (i.e., Facebook friend network) that requires the self to be presented in an authentic way. Although there is some scope to present an idealised self (e.g., through the selection of flattering photos) there was little evidence in this study, and in the research of others, that an idealised self is portrayed at the expense of the real (Back et al., 2010; Mehdizadeh, 2010). This is particularly due to the offline encounters between online friends and the written feedback provided on Facebook profiles (e.g., comments on pictures and status updates).

At this point there is limited published research data on the use of status updates and the joining of groups/pages to reflect online identity. This study revealed that status updates are a valued means of communicating with one's audience, particularly by projecting humorous or insightful comments. This finding supports Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs and Bellotti (2010) who found entertaining status updates result in positive communication acts between online friends which suggests successful impression management. People who do not adhere to unspoken rules regarding tone of status updates and continually post negative or mundane status updates are viewed critically. Status updates are not made to stand as isolated comments, rather the author can use the status update to provoke a response from his/her audience. This interaction between online friends is then a source of analysis for others who, although not directly part of the online dialogue, have access to conversation.

Widely researched is the use of photographs to create an impression online. This study suggests that the selection of flattering photos (an ideal self) is acceptable. However, photos are interpreted with regard to the offline relationship which may or may not exist. In the context of diverse Facebook friendship networks each photo will be subject to different interpretations based on the contextual information available to the viewer. Issues arising in this study about the

posting of photos are supported by studies emerging across different age groups. Willett and Ringrose (2008), in their study of 14-16 year old girls, found social rules exist in relation to how much of one's body is on display. Siibak (2009) also found underlying rules used in the analysis of poses and behaviour evident in photos.

In addition to identity construction, online photos are also used to stimulate memories (Strano, 2008) and connect with one's offline social group. Photos are posted online en masse and used to demonstrate to others that the individual is socially engaged, the member of various social/cultural groups and undertaking interesting activities (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Siibak, 2009; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Zhao & Elesh, 2008). There is, however a certain level of social acceptability in the nature and types of photos shared, if crossed, can negatively impact identity perceptions. One unique aspect of posting pictures online is the ability of others to tag and comment on photographs. This represents the co-constructed nature of online identity. Comments made on a photo can significantly impact how others perceive an individual's image.

The key finding in relation to membership of Facebook groups is that using this element for identity interpretations can be misleading. This may explain why there is limited published research examining the role of Facebook groups in relation to identity construction. Many participants were beginning to change their practices in joining groups/pages and becoming increasingly more selective. In part this is because their membership to a group did not result in action, it was merely a statement of their interest. It is noted from media reports that groups do emerge which can serve public good through social action but this was not the reported experience of the participants of this study.

Finally, strategies to manage the diverse social networks that exist on Facebook emerged from the data. Participants in this study did not make use of privacy settings to restrict the content available to different groups across their online friend networks. Reasons participants gave for not using various privacy settings was not wanting to offend anyone in their friend network or a belief such action was unnecessary because of the self-censorship they consciously put into place. This finding conflicts with other research in the field where privacy settings were applied by at least some participants to manage their diverse social networks (see, for example, DiMicco & Millen, 2007; West, Lewis & Currie, 2009; Marder, Joinson & Shankar, 2012).

Similar to the findings of Vitak, Lampe, Gray and Ellison (2012) the participants of this study consciously managed their online identity through the use self-censorship with clear understanding of their audience. Participants were aware of the public nature of their postings and took measures to monitor their own online behaviour. There was clear understanding that even though their profile may only be accessible by 'friends' that scope of friend was wide-reaching and all of their activity on Facebook left a permanent trace which could come under scrutiny at a later point in time.

Other research has concluded that Facebook users' perception of audience is limited and this has consequences for the appropriateness of their online activity. Lewis and West (2009), for instance, found their participants tended to behave online as if they were addressing only their real-life friends and DiMicco and Millen (2007) found the majority of their participants who had

recently transitioned from education to workplace, failed to craft their profile for both professional and non-professional audiences. However, none of the regrets that can be associated with Facebook users online posts found by Wang et al. (2012) were evident in the reported experiences of these participants, possibly because the participants were cognizant of the potential unintended audience.

The results of this study into adult Facebook users' experiences with online identity demonstrates ways in which the model of identity transition over the ages presented by van Halen and Janssen (2004) could be expanded to include *digital identity*. See Table 3 below.

**Table 3. Identity - Premodern, Early Modern, Late Modern, Digital**

	<b>Premodern</b>	<b>Early modern</b>	<b>Late modern</b>	<b>Digital</b>
<i>Social identity</i>	Ascribed	Achieved	Managed	Co-constructed
<i>Personal identity</i>	Heteronomous	Individualised	Image oriented	Public and permanent
<i>Identity criteria</i>	Loyalty to tradition	Personal unity	Expressiveness and flexibility	Provocative and Interactive

Table 3 depicts digital identity as being co-constructed, public and permanent, provocative and interactive. These elements are based on the three key differences between digital identity compared with identity constructs of the past.

Firstly, while it is acknowledged that identity has always been impacted by social interactions these interactions traditionally occurred between individuals and groups interacting within specific boundaries (e.g., family members, work colleagues, social groups). This has meant that individuals can maintain (to some extent) different identities in different contexts. Online social networking has melded a person's family, friends and colleagues (amongst others) together. Each interaction that occurs publically on a Facebook page is open for interpretation by all the associated Facebook networks. This gives insights into a person's otherwise separate identities (professional and private). Harter (1999) suggests that false self-behaviour involves the suppression of one's opinions, thoughts and feelings. In the case of online social networking a user might make efforts to suppress their thoughts and opinions to present a desirable image of themselves, but the postings of others can make public otherwise private beliefs/actions. This, in a sense, is the co-construction of one's social identity through a broad range of networks.

Secondly, sites such as Facebook result in a permanent record of social interactions. Identity has always been subject to change based on social interaction but this can often go unnoticed as it occurs gradually over time. The digital age has enabled a permanent record of one's identity evolution to be captured on the timeline of their social networking site. It is now possible to review one's online profile (which could extend back several years) and see changes in that person's life: appearance, relationships, employment, family and so on. This change sees personal identity formation as public and permanent.

Finally, identity criteria is defined as provocative and interactive because online social networking encourages users to make status updates and post photos which are then subject to comment by the individual's online network of diverse friends. Photos and status updates are the catalyst for online dialogue. The participants in this study of adult Facebook users made numerous claims to use the tools of Facebook to encourage communication, sometimes provocatively and other times to strengthen existing offline friendship bonds (see Young, 2011).

## Conclusions

When online social networking sites emerged the early rhetoric revolved around the expertise of adolescents due to their technical savvy. This study has demonstrated that in accordance with the traditional master/apprentice notions underpinning socio-cultural theories of learning, adolescent users could benefit from observing the ways in which adult users manage their online identity to project an appropriate image of themselves across diverse social networks. In general, adult Facebook users have the life experience to recognise the potential negative consequences of their online social networking activity and so adjust their practices accordingly.

This exploration into online social networking continues to move thinking away from a view that the Internet is a space to experiment with different identities, toward an understanding that authenticity in identity presentation and interactions is essential to facilitate the online social networking process (Harter, 1999; Gosling, Gaddins & Vaziare, 2007).

Analysis of individual experiences using the tools of Facebook to create an online presence expands the perception of social identity. The structure of Facebook causes the individual to present their social self, rather than controlling and manipulating their individual identity. The choices being made by adult users are, more often than not, to connect with others, rather than for self-promotion.

An important area for further research is to examine profiles longitudinally. At any given time a person's Facebook profile will represent his/her social identity at that point. The permanence of one's profile, as captured in Facebook's current timeline structure, presents a valuable source for analysis of identity transition. The collection of status updates, photographs and membership to groups/pages combined with the comments made by others is a chronological portfolio of one's progression through life, thereby providing a vehicle for reflection on how one's life has evolved and how the person has transformed over time.

This research set out to address two questions. Firstly, of the tools available on Facebook, which ones are employed to present an online identity? Secondly, how do the diverse social networks which exist on Facebook affect online identity? Investigating these two questions has revealed a balance to be achieved between presenting oneself positively without being self-indulgent. The participants of study ranged from 21-57 years and each appears to have found that balance. An important issue is the management of diverse social networks present on one online profile. The participants managed this through a process of self-censorship, rather than utilising privacy features to distinguish access between different family, social and workplace groups. The activities of adult users would be well placed to inform educational strategies with adolescents to maximise their potential for appropriate long-term online social networking activity.

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