

## **Does This Profile Picture Make Me Look Fat? Facebook and the Presentation of Self**

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**Abstract:** With over 800 million users worldwide, the popular online social networking service, Facebook, has become a cultural phenomenon. This working research paper examines one aspect of Facebook: the presentation of self. Using information collected through face-to-face interviews with two participants, one male and one female, I investigate the reasons why and how these participants alter their online self-images. This research project hypothesizes that professional users project a controlled image to those who view their profile. They limit and remove undesirable information from their Facebook accounts. Such practices indicate these educated users are aware of the negative consequences they might encounter if they were to post all information, especially that which they consider of low quality, on Facebook. The research project acknowledges the need to conduct more interviews and further research to test and verify its hypothesis.

*Key Terms:* Facebook, Presentation of Self, Privacy Maintenance, Stigmatization

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, online social networking services such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter have become increasingly popular with individuals young and old. Facebook has become the gold standard of these services with over eight hundred million users worldwide, much more than any other online social network (Facebook Press Information, 2011). With the increased use of such services, sociologists have developed growing interest in the presentation of self through this new medium. Emma Teitel (2011) points out that Facebook, and social media in general, can act as a “personal tabloid” (p.1). Teitel suggests that Facebook is now affecting social lives in ways never before imagined. Self-presentation is relevant to this impact.

Facebook is a cultural phenomenon that affects the lives of many of its users. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) stated that when an individual enters a new social setting others immediately judge him or her while they seek information about this new individual, including his or her socioeconomic status, conception of self, competence and trustworthiness. Since Facebook offers a social setting, albeit in an online environment, users could draw conclusions about someone they have not met solely through the examination of an individual's Facebook page. In response, individual users of Facebook alter their profiles to reflect a specific self-image. The alteration may include or exclude certain photographs and written posts.

This in-progress research project investigates how and why two Facebook users achieve a desired self-image. It does so by interviewing two regular, active Facebook users, identified here as Stella and Robert to protect their privacy. The participants are in their twenties. Each interview is between twenty and thirty minutes in length. To determine my sample group, I used criterion-based sampling. Additionally, my sample comprises the main elements of convenience sampling. My sample group can be looked at as a convenience sample because I am Facebook-friends with both of the participants. The interviews mainly involved the participants responding and giving their opinions on topics related to Facebook use and the ways they alter the image they portray on Facebook. Due to the small number of participants, which limits the scope of this research project's claims, the study hypothesizes that certain users of Facebook control their self-image online by altering their profiles.

### **Discussion**

The first interview was conducted with Stella, a twenty-one-year-old University of Victoria student from Vancouver, B.C. Stella noted that she uses Facebook to connect with friends in Vancouver and to stay informed about what everyone is doing socially. When I asked her about the privacy settings she uses on her Facebook page, she talked about how she categorized her Facebook friends into groups: friends, family, or just herself. Each group can only see certain information. This categorization demonstrates that she is conscious of who can see her Facebook page and what information they may access.

The second interview was conducted with Robert, a twenty-four-year-old law school graduate who lives in Vancouver. Robert attended law school in Europe. Thus, his friends are spread throughout the world. During our interview, Robert stated that he uses Facebook to keep in touch with friends who live outside Vancouver, specifically people he went to school with in Europe. Regarding his

privacy settings, Robert limits access to only his friends so that future employers will not pre-judge him based on his Facebook account. Robert explained that “the information on Facebook has no context, and this can lead people [such as employers] to misconstrue their perception of people [especially prospective employees].” Robert stated that he keeps his Facebook page private to ensure that others will not judge him based on information presented out of context.

Clearly, in both interviews privacy is a common theme. Both participants take the necessary steps to keep their Facebook pages private from the general public. Similarly, these two participants are mindful of how they will be perceived through their Facebook pages. This awareness is tied closely to the main topic of this research project – the presentation of self through Facebook. The interviews revealed that the overarching theme was the projection of a controlled image over Facebook. Other relevant themes that came to light during the interviews involved vanity, judgment, control and articulating that a Facebook profile is a façade.

Stella uses different ways to control the image she presents over her Facebook page. She controls who can see certain information on her page through the security settings integrated into Facebook. She further noted that she removes tags that identify her in photos if the photos are not flattering. She may even have the person who uploaded the photo remove it outright from Facebook. Stella actually removed photos of herself with her ex-boyfriend once they broke up, explaining, “Facebook is truly an extension of my life and I didn’t want him [ex-boyfriend] to be associated with me anymore.” This revelation shows that she is mindful of the self-image she broadcasts over Facebook as this image will reflect on her in real life. Stella admitted that she puts up a façade on her Facebook page by posting more positive pictures and content when her life is going well and when she is feeling good about herself.

When I discussed with Robert how he maintains a certain image over Facebook, he answered in ways similar to Stella. Robert noted that he has removed pictures from his Facebook account because he felt that he did not look good in them. Additionally, he removed posts that others had made on his page because he felt they were annoying; he did not want these unprofessional posts to be associated with him. Robert articulated that he believes Facebook is a controllable image. He stated, “you can show people a controlled image based on what you wear, who you’re seen with, if you travel or not and if you have varied experiences.” Robert noted that his main goal on Facebook is to seem “less ordinary.” He achieves this through posting pictures of his varied experiences and controlling the display of posts from others on his wall. He stated that “not doing this would defeat the purpose of being able to control your image over Facebook.” Perception, judgment

and self-image are common themes within Robert's interview. He is concerned with how others, especially the general public and future employers, will judge him based on content that has little or no context. Robert wants the information that he presents to be positive and reflective of his best self.

During the interview, Robert gave an example of a friend of the same age who represents an extreme of Facebook users. He spoke of a friend who has a bland Facebook page with few pictures, posts or friends. He stated that in real life this person is one of the most popular people he knows. This contradiction brings up a question: are frequent Facebook users who attempt to create a façade on their profile actually popular? The answer in Robert's opinion is no. He believes that people who overuse Facebook seek attention and attempt to validate an aspect of their lives through the construction of what they consider to be a popular image. This could include the daily posting of photos of their activities in order to suggest to their viewers that they have an interesting and eventful life. To illustrate this point, Robert provided another example, though this time of someone who overuses Facebook. This person, who graduated from high school with Robert, is said to use Facebook as "a form of psychotherapy; she expresses her feelings and complains about people who she knows can see her Facebook page." It is likely that this user is unaware of the negative self-image she is portraying over Facebook. Robert stated that he keeps this person as a friend on Facebook to "keep up with people who have failed in life." He added, "their bad decisions help to reinforce my good decisions." This reinforcement provides Robert with a justification for keeping this type of Facebook friend.

During our interview, Stella also provided an example of one of her friends. This friend, however, was the opposite of Robert's minimalist friend. Stella's friend had over 1500 Facebook friends and had thousands of photographs on her Facebook page. Stella believed this person's façade was obnoxious and she was flaunting her life. This person allows anyone on Facebook to browse all aspects of her Facebook page, including pictures and other personal information. This example represents an extreme segment of Facebook users and the façades they present. Robert and Stella are both examples of medium-use Facebook users. When examining the statements made by both Robert and Stella, I have found no overt gender differences with regard to the presentation of self over Facebook. They both alter their Facebook pages in similar ways and attempt to project similar images, in this case, their best selves. In addition to the previously mentioned themes that came up during the interviews another common theme was that of stigmatization.

Using Facebook may result in stigmatization. For example, it is becoming increasingly common for individuals to stigmatize those who share little over

Facebook. The issue became apparent in the interviews. Robert stated that he believed these users had something to hide because they anticipate how others will judge them. Similarly, Stella believed these users are putting up a façade with their lack of sharing; however, she understood that Facebook is one social element and these hesitant users should be granted their right to privacy.

### **Conclusion**

My research speculates that users like Stella and Robert, who belong to the same age group and seek professionalism, project a certain image to the viewers of their Facebook profiles. This image is altered in several ways including the removal of negative photos and comments and the addition of positive material. Stella and Robert further suggest that even those users who share very little on Facebook seem to anticipate negative reaction from their fellow Facebook users. The former preemptively react by sharing as little as possible, and, by so doing, a façade is created. Indeed, the image users project through Facebook is what future employers, friends, or others will perceive these individuals to be. Based on the two interviews that I conducted, I have found that both Facebook users are aware of their online self-image and alter this self-image in similar ways regardless of their gender. Ultimately, their goal is to advance their self-image. In parallel with these specific findings, this research speculates the presence of similar practices among other users who may or may not belong to the same age group and in search of professional careers. However, this working paper cannot verify this inference because of its narrow sample group. More interviews need to be conducted.

### **References**

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