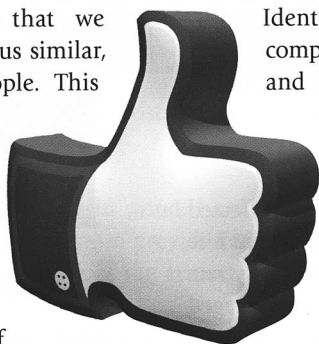# Facebook and the presentation of self

A structure-versus-agency analysis

Sarah McLaughlin

A core issue for sociologists remains the structure-versus-agency debate. Can we address it by looking at approaches to identity construction on Facebook?

The concept of identity is important to sociologists because it is only by establishing our own identities, and learning about the identities of individuals and groups, that we come to know what makes us similar, or different, to other people. This helps us to form social connections and establish group solidarity and identification with others. It also creates disconnections and divisions. This article explores the dichotomy of structure-versus-agency approaches to identity through its application to Facebook.

What is identity?

Identity is made up of two components: how we see ourselves and how others see us. Part of our identity involves aspects of choice. We may, for example, identify with certain sports teams, types of music, fashion or leisure groups. We have less control, however, over other fragments of our identity, such as our social class, gender, age or nationality. This is because these elements are shaped by social forces. This leads us to question the extent to which — and how — structure and agency influence the formation and maintenance of our personal and group identities.

Sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman (1990) infer that being socialised into culture involves introducing and sustaining social order in society. Culture can shape and constrain individual identity, and identity plays an active role in social order. Goffman (1990), by contrast, described society as being like a stage where individuals 'perform' to create certain impressions of who they are. He suggested that individuals manipulate and manage the impression others receive of them. This is what Goffman refers to as 'the presentation of self'. One medium of impression management may be found through social media sites such as Facebook.

Facebook is an opportune platform for individuals to be introduced to new ideas, trends and opinions, and it provides the prospect of asserting one's identity in the public sphere. A sense of *common* identity can be acquired by those who want to be part of — or at least suggest to their friends they are part of — a particular cause or opinion, through the liking and sharing of causes or news stories. However, the extent to which Facebook offers a reflection of our true identities or, as Goffman might put it, a medium to manage other people's perception of who we are and how we want others to see us, can be questioned.

Facebook and identity management
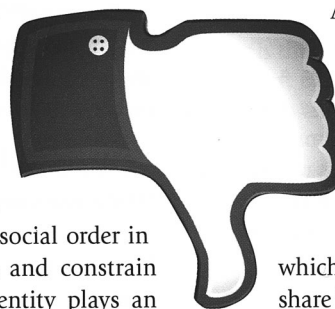
An important part of the self is the 'ideal self'. This is a set of ideas about who we think we ought to be, rather than who we actually are. Facebook users may hide behind a guise, portray images of the ideal self, which individuals can create and share in order to depict an image of the person they would like others to see, rather than who they actually are.

Facebook users can choose which profile photographs they would like to display, for example. They can also update their status and portray to their audience what they would like them to hear, how they are feeling, or what they are doing.

Signposts

The social media phenomenon that is Facebook is here used as a vehicle for Sarah McLaughlin to consider the issue of identity construction. Using examples of both structuralism and action theories, she examines different views regarding the source of our identities and looks at how we may manipulate them to present ourselves in a particular light. This article is useful for all students in its discussion of sociological theories, and will be of particular interest to those taking the 'Culture and identity' or 'Mass media' topics.

Key concepts

identity, structure, action, virtue signalling

Facebook profiles are a portrait of the identity we want other people to see — our relationship status, occupation, group affiliation, education, friends, feelings, opinions, the list goes on. Facebook provides the perfect vehicle for such self-portrayal.

However, as well as presenting ourselves in a particular way, Facebook friends can also reflect back by posting about us or commenting on our posts. This, in turn, influences our own perceptions of the sort of person we are. However, we may be misguided in our beliefs about how others see us. We might think that the evaluations of others are more negative — or more positive — than they really are. In short, how we *think* others see us is not necessarily how they *do* see us.
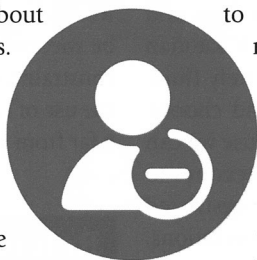
Signalling virtue via social media

Facebook may be used in an attempt to manipulate the perception we want others to have of us. However, this was challenged during the 'naked selfies' campaign in 2014 when women 'dared' each other to post photographs of themselves online, ostensibly wearing no make-up. This was accompanied by a call-to-arms, imploring other women to do the same in order to raise money and awareness for breast cancer. The posts were accompanied by the amount donated to the charity.

This campaign provided an opportunity to demonstrate affiliation with other women, charity givers, people who care about curing cancer, and females who want others to believe they don't need make-up to be accepted. For some, this is a selfless

act, but for others there may be another reason for such public displays of charity.

Bartholomew (2015) has coined the phrase 'virtue signalling' to describe the way people say or write things online to indicate that they are virtuous. Facebook is saturated with virtue signalling. This includes friends liking pages in order to indicate their association or moral compass, sharing articles, promoting charities and publicly announcing their acts of charitable donation.

For sociologists such as Charles Cooley (1972), this would indicate the need we might have for portraying ourselves as virtuous in an attempt to make others see us in a positive light. Other examples might be the recent ice-bucket challenge, the push-up challenge, or the 'movember' (moustache) movement — the list goes on.

Structure versus agency matters

A functionalist approach

Structural functionalists tend to suggest that individuals are the product of social influences (structures). Family, religion, schooling and work are all examples of structuralist influences over our identities. Identity is important to the functioning of society because it helps to create a sense of common identity and solidarity among groups. From this viewpoint, therefore, identity is created through the socialisation process and shaped largely by social structures, rather than being an expression of a person's unique or innate individuality.

However, Facebook often seems to be the vehicle for individuals making free choices to express their own preferences and values.

For example, many supporters of the US Supreme Court's decision to legalise same-sex unions in 2015 superimposed a rainbow flag over their Facebook profile picture. They did this presumably to demonstrate social solidarity and a common identity among gay-rights supporters, or as an indication of membership to the wider support movement. This meme was adopted by over 26 million Facebook users within 1 week of the change in law.

On the surface at least, this may suggest millions of individuals sharing the same values. But when analysing the change in profile picture more deeply, it may be inferred that some users felt pressured to adopt the rainbow flag because not doing so might suggest their lack of support — or even an indication that they were against the cause.

The rainbow phenomenon may be interpreted as a result of peer pressure and the need to portray a certain identity to other users. Functionalists might point out how this demonstrates the way we are socialised from birth to follow the norms and trends of our society. We feel intense pressure to conform.

An interactionist approach

In contrast to structuralist approaches, interactionist sociologists are more likely to suggest that individuals have a much more active role (agency) in shaping social life. Interactionists tend to reject the structuralist view that behaviour is mainly a product of external forces over which we have little control. After all, we can choose whether or not to share or like a page — or even to have a Facebook account at all.

What we cannot control, though, is how people *interpret* what they see. This is key for interactionists. The photo with friends drinking on Facebook may imply that the individual is able to let their hair down, now and again, and have active relationships. Alternatively, it might be seen as an unfortunate public display which could put off potential employers.

A postmodernist approach

Postmodernists challenge conventional ideas about the construction of identity with

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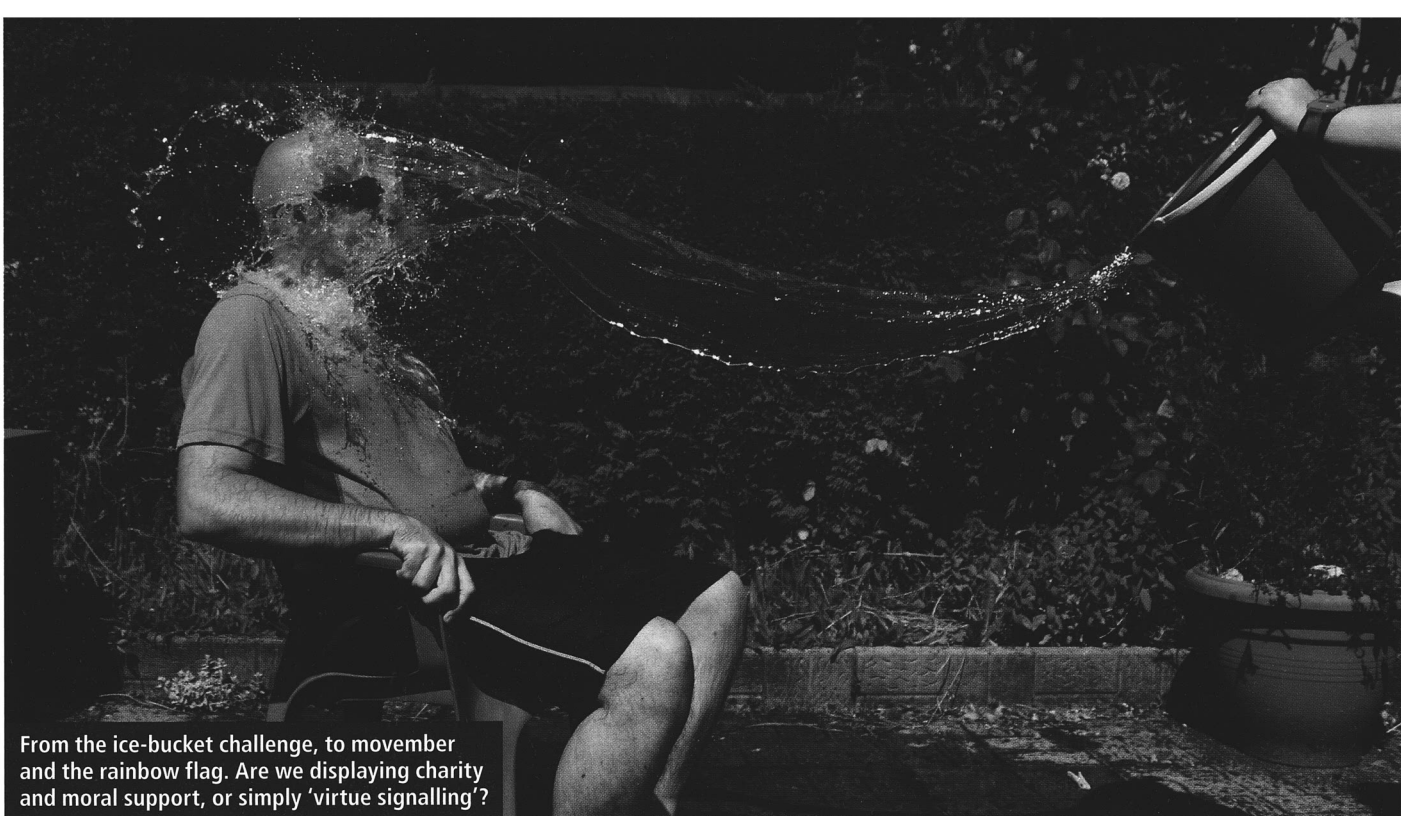
From the ice-bucket challenge, to movember and the rainbow flag. Are we displaying charity and moral support, or simply 'virtue signalling'?

their assertion that personal identity is a product of choice, rather than a structural constraint. Bauman (1996) inferred that, although poorer consumers are at a real disadvantage, we now have greater choice than ever: about how we look, what we consume and what we believe in. He referred to today's society as resembling an endless shopping mall, where people can shop around for elements of a satisfying identity.

Bauman's assertion reflects the catalogue of different identities we can construct online using our Facebook profiles. We can change our relationship status, our photographs, which depict us as professional or someone who likes to party, or say whether we support charities or are passionate about a particular news story.

The reflexive self

This very strong notion of agency is paramount to Giddens' (1991) argument that individuals are not passive receivers of identity but are reflexive and able to alter their identities as they reflect on themselves. How many times have you looked back on previous status updates and photographs posted on Facebook and deleted them, or felt differently about them?

OUR FACEBOOK PROFILES REFLECT THE PERSON WE WANT OTHERS TO THINK WE ARE

Giddens calls this the 'reflexive self' and suggests that identities change over time as we *reflect* on interactions with others and with agencies of socialisation. Both Bauman and Giddens see identity as relatively fluid. But our real freedom to 'pick and choose' who we are is questionable, because we can easily be constrained by social pressures to conform. Such choices may be restricted due to factors such as family expectations, education, laws and culture.

Fear of negative comments, or of being 'unfriended' online, may restrict a Facebook user from presenting their true feelings, or true self, online. This leads to questions about how free we really are to present our true selves on Facebook. Our Facebook profiles reflect the person we want others to think we are, but we can't control how others respond to this.

Conclusion

Advocates of structuralist perspectives argue that identity is a product of structural influences, pressing individuals to conform. In contrast, postmodernists refer to the increased choices we have today, inferring that individuals can pick and choose who they want to be — as on Facebook. Interactionists, however, warn that identity construction occurs in social interaction: it is also about how others interpret the messages we may send.

This discussion regarding Facebook profiles illustrates the more free-floating

sense of identity we have today. It shows how attempts to present ourselves to the world in particular ways may not always be successful. It also shows how choice and constraint, social action and structure, make the use of Facebook for identity construction a far from straightforward exercise.

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