

The role of memes in the construction of Facebook personae

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ABSTRACT

This research is based on the assumption that social media sites – such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – have changed the way in which memes (culturally transmitted ideas) are transmitted or spread. It is argued that social media have provided the most fertile environment for the replication of memes to date. The social networking site Facebook is the main social media example used throughout the research. The way in which Facebook is represented in film, as well as the ways in which the offline lives of the characters are affected by their social media profiles, specifically as depicted in the film *Catfish* (Joost and Schulman 2010) are analysed. Lastly, it is argued that one can construct an entirely new persona, or merely experiment with different aspects of who you are, on social media sites. This online persona can be influenced by the memes one chooses to spread online. Naturally, all memes carry connotations, values and judgements. These memes collate with one's profile and, thus, the connotations attached to the memes one shares are then associated with one's online persona/profile. It is found that although a social networking user tries to portray him/herself in an idealised manner, these memetic connotations give a true impression of his/her offline persona. As a result, there is not much difference between the user's online and offline personae.

Keywords: Facebook, identity, memes, persona, semiotics, social media, social networking, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

Recently South African resident Brent Lindeque decided to buy somebody lunch, after being nominated on the new viral drinking game #NekNominate. The game is described as 'the social drinking game for social media' and encourages participants to drink in outlandish ways before nominating two friends to do the same (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014, 1). When Lindeque was nominated by one of his friends, he decided to change the rules of the game and buy someone lunch instead of going on a drinking spree. He nominated two of his friends to do the same. The #NekNominate craze almost immediately became popular, spreading to England, Wales, and Dubai. When asked why he decided to buy someone food instead of participating in the drinking game, Lindeque responded: 'When I first heard about the #NekNominate trend, I thought: "Why would anybody put something on Facebook that they wouldn't be proud of?"' Facebook is 10 years

old today and people actually see what you put out there. You should be proud of what you're sharing' (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014, 2).

Lindeque's response to the social drinking game highlights one of the main aspects of social media, namely the content published, including memes in the form of text, images, and videos actively contribute to the online persona or identity of the user. Importantly, online personae influence the way in which offline personae are perceived. In this analysis, the spread of Internet memes through social media is discussed. It is argued here that the memes spread using social media aid in constructing online personae on social media sites. The social networking site Facebook - currently the most popular social networking site - forms the main focus of the discussion. As Facebook is increasingly incorporated into the everyday life of its users (Madden et al. 2013, 18), the possible influence and harm of selected memes on the identity of a social media user is explored.

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

As the popularity of social media increases inevitably the number of people using social media to communicate with friends and family, meet new people, and stay up-to-date on current events also increases. There are numerous social networking sites, each with its own specific function and niche market such as the social networking site Friendster used to meet new friends and dates, whereas LinkedIn is used to find jobs and Tribe is used to provide recommendations (Gross & Acquisti 2005, 1). Some even create online profiles because they feel peer-pressured to be part of an online world (Cohen & Shade 2008, 1). For this reason, some participants on Facebook notice that there is a negativity attached to not having a Facebook account (Imam 2012, 3). The maintenance or creation of connections (whether visible or hidden) is a major aspect of most social media (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2006, 27; Awan & Gauntlett 2013, 118; Sheldon 2007, 50).

In this regard the smartphone has undeniably increased the availability and access to one's favourite social platforms that can now be accessed anywhere or time (Weaver 2010, 25; Beer & Burrows 2007, 4). In fact, 80% of online teenagers now use social media and 50% of smartphone-owning teenagers mostly access social media from their smartphones (Madden et al. 2013, 16). This is of particular importance in a South African context, where there are more mobile Internet connections than traditional desktop connections (Donner & Gitau 2009, 2). The use of smartphones to access social media has also increased the rate at which

images, texts and memes spread. For example, a photograph can be taken and directly uploaded onto a social media site using a phone. Furthermore, social media applications can be downloaded and stored on a smartphone; resulting in immediate notifications of tagged photographs or messages, as well as easier access to one's online profile and the profiles of other users.

As the use of social media increases, so does its effect on the social media user's life. For instance, people are exploring one another's Facebook profiles before going on a date or to inform the decision upon hiring someone (Bachrach et al. 2012, 1). As a result, some jobseekers attempt to make themselves appear more employable to potential employers, by untagging unfavourable photographs and hiding posts (Cohen & Shade 2008, 211; Kelley 2007, 23; Gershon 2011, 876). This causes some concerns about the role of social media in the workplace (Purvis 2012, 1; Greenhouse 2013, 1; Taylor 2013, 2; Gitlin 2013, 1), as well as social media addiction (Sparkes 2013, 1; Potarazu 2013, 1), the privacy of information (Gatto 2013, 1; Bosker 2013, 1; Choney 2013, 1) and the prevalence of online sex offenders (Kravets 2013, 1; FPB on Mixit's anti-porn stance 2010, 1). However, while there are many concerns about the use of social media, many users have benefitted from its use e.g. gaining money and fame through their exposure on social media sites. In this way, social media has helped launch the careers of some musicians and actors, such as the MySpace launched band Arctic Monkeys' music career (Dockrill 2006, 1), while YouTube helped launch the careers of Die Antwoord and Justin Bieber (Adib 2009,1) to mention only a few. Currently, PSY, the South Korean rapper's *Gangnam Style* (Director: Young, 2012) is the most viewed video on YouTube with over 1.7 billion views and has spawned countless memes.

Social media also influences government decisions and communication. For example, Iceland rewrote their constitution according to the comments made by Icelanders on Facebook (Morris 2012, 1). Another example is the recent assistance of social media in the capture of those responsible for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. As many people were filming or taking photographs of the Boston Marathon on their smartphones, the American police asked these people for any and all footage to help the police identify the bombers. One such mobile phone photograph helped the police identify the two bombers, as the photograph showed one of the suspects fleeing the scene moments before the first explosion (Jansen 2013, 1). The police kept the citizens updated on the status of the proceeding manhunt through Facebook

and Twitter (Jansen 2013, 2). Upon capturing the second suspect, the Boston police informed the public via their Twitter account (Figure 1).

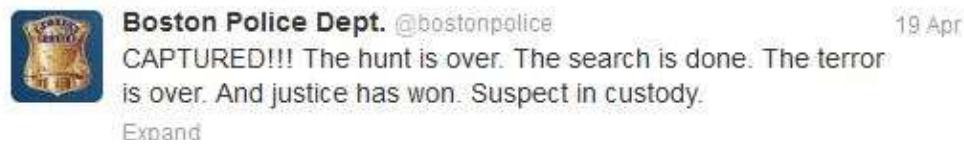


Figure 1: Boston Police Department, Captured!!!, Twitter, 2013. Screen shot by author.

These examples clearly illustrate the effects that social media have on users' lives. In the remainder of the article the focus shifts to the use of memes in the construction of online personae. First a brief introduction to memes and their digital migration is provided.

SOCIAL MEDIA MEMETICS

The term meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976, 192), who described memes as replicators that 'propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation'. While the definition of the meme is still contested; Dawkins (1976), Daniel C. Dennett (1995) and Susan Blackmore (1999) all argue that the meme is a unit of imitation. They also maintain that a meme consists of the following characteristics: longevity, fecundity, fidelity, variation, selection and heredity. Naturally, the advent of the Internet changed the way in which memes are spread, although Internet memes still closely mime pre-Internet memes.

Any Internet user can create a new meme on meme generating sites, such as www.memegenerator.net, www.knowyourmeme.com, www.quickmeme.com and www.memecenter.com. These sites contain the instructions or blueprints (templates) needed to create memes. The memes created on these meme generating sites are usually all slightly altered but still traceable to the meme family. If one compares this with older pre-Internet memes, such as phrases, jokes and urban legends, these can now be sent as chain letters to any, or all, email contacts simultaneously. In this way, the Internet assists in both the spread of Internet memes and traditional memes (in an online environment) because it accelerates the '... spread not only of texts that were previously identified with oral traditions, such as urban legends and jokes, but also as nesting the creation of spreadable new visual genres of expression' (Shifman 2012, 189).

Another important factor is the selection of Internet memes by users to share with others. Making a selection of memes is inevitable because it is impossible to share every single online meme available - there are simply just too many to choose from. Memes are furthermore hereditary as they are shared from another online source, and in this way pass on from one Internet user to another. It can also be argued that the Internet increases the longevity, fecundity and fidelity of Internet memes. Longevity is achieved on the Internet as memes are stored online on websites such as www.9gag.com. This means Internet memes can be accessed any time and place (Blackmore 1999, 216). In other words, memes can appear anywhere regardless of geographical and cultural boundaries (Marshall 1995, 3) and they can be copied with a 100% accuracy rate.

It can be argued then, just as the Internet assists the spread of memes, so social media assists the spread of memes. Social media platforms connect a network of Internet users, and the members of these networked publics¹ can transmit memes to one another. While the Internet enables users to send memes to selected people (e.g. emailing), social media also enables a user to mass-publish a meme to numerous people (usually those in their network). For example, Justin Bieber has more than 44 million followers on the social media site Twitter, meaning over 44 million people are potentially exposed to each meme that he publishes. Accordingly, Hayes (2007, 1) argues that social media memes ('bemes') spread more rapidly than their predecessor memes:

...a beme moves a billion times faster than a meme ever could. That's the power of citizen-driven media networks. Do the math. There are nearly 60 million blogs...and many millions of social media citizens...a beme today can be created, promulgated and soldered into social consciousness in a fraction of the time it took memes to 30 years ago when Professor Dawkins first made the observation.

The mass exposure to memes on social media increases the fecundity of memes considerably. Memes can be shared by linking to a meme on Facebook or clicking on the 'retweet' button on Twitter. This 'push-button' technology greatly increases the heredity of memes passed on from one person to many others (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004, 1). For example, User A could post a meme on their Facebook 'wall', which is then viewed by their Facebook friends, including User B. In turn User B can post the same meme on their own Facebook 'wall' by clicking on the 'share' button (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Share button, Facebook, 2013.

Social media also enables the variation of memes. When ‘sharing’ a meme on Facebook, the user is given the option to add a comment to the meme, thereby slightly altering or contextualizing the specific meme. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear divide memes into those with high fidelity, copied with only slight variation, and those memes with a low fidelity, copied only after being remixed (2005, 13). The high fidelity Internet memes consist of hoax memes, social commentary memes, and memes celebrating the unusual, as well as fan-based memes. Low fidelity Internet memes, on the other hand, consist of collaborative and humorous memes that have been remixed to a great extent. The potential mass-exposure of users to Internet memes on social media sites, such as Facebook, and the resultant increase in the number of memes circulating the social media sphere due to easy replication, considerably increases the selection of memes to be shared.

This is particularly evident on social media sites, such as Twitter, where users retweet news stories or events, or tweet a comment and link to news stories or events. Apparently memes only spread if they are believed to be trustworthy, relevant or useful (Shifman 2012, 199) or due to their positive or negative emotional content (Berger sa, 5; Heath 2001, 7). This is evident on Facebook where a rhino poaching meme is, for instance, specifically designed to create a strong emotional response in users, thereby encouraging users to take action against rhino poaching. Regardless of the reasons for the selection of certain memes, these Internet memes become part of a social media profile page history and remain there until specifically deleted by the user. For example, on Facebook, all memes ‘shared’ by a user become a part of that user’s ‘timeline’, and these memes remain there unless deleted by the user.

Internet memes contribute to the ‘environmental niche’ of a webpage or social media site (Laland & Odling-Smee 2000, 134) because they can be used as tools to contextualize the environment:

Memes have longevity only if they both succeed and serve as a useful tool for a successful environmental niche. Memes can be short-lived due to the failure of their communicative efficiency or the failure of the niche they represent or both (Lissack 2004, 3).

Only those memes that are suited to their ‘socio-cultural environment’ are likely to spread (Shifman 2012, 188). Memes are, therefore, *selected* by the user of a specific social media site or webpage to compliment the environment (online profile page or webpage) in which they are posted. This means memes make a semiotic contribution to the environment in which they are located. According to Terrence Deacon (sa, 7):

A meme is a sign: some physical thing which, by virtue of some distinctive feature, can be recruited by an interpretive process within a larger system as re-presenting something else, conveying information into that system and reorganizing it with respect to that something else.

Therefore, a meme, corresponds to other signs and also refer to denotations, connotations, myths and ideologies. For example, on a denotative level the meme in (Figure 3) shows a



Figure 3: Unknown designer, Goth... Hippie..., Facebook, 2011.

multi-coloured and a black bird sitting on a branch, looking away from one another. The word ‘Hippie’ appears in a speech bubble above the black bird and the word ‘Goth’ above the multi-coloured bird. The connotations attached to the memes arise mainly from the meanings associated with Hippie and Goth. Typically a Hippie wears colourful clothing, is free-spirited, fun-loving, easy-going, and cares about nature – represented by the colourful bird. Whereas a Goth, wears black, is morbid and listens to heavy metal – represented by the black

bird. The 'Goth' bird is clearly annoyed by 'Hippie' bird, and vice versa. Both are associated with the myth of being anti-conformist. Depending on the environment in which it is posted, this meme can convey different meanings, including the user's view on Hippies and Goths.

As a result, the way in which the meme is viewed on a social media site, such as Facebook, will be dependent on the meme's environment (the rest of the profile and posts) and, therefore, memes collaborate with one another and the environment they are presented in. In other words, part of an online persona can be created by the connotations that are attached to specific memes and these memes, in turn, add specific elements to one's online persona. In this way, new memes can reinforce any existing online persona that has been created by previous memes. If a meme contradicts the connotations attached to previous memes, one could simply assume that the person's online persona has gained a new complexity, or that there is another aspect to someone's personality that you were not previously aware of. Therefore, a link to a YouTube music video on one's Facebook page could indicate what music a user likes or what music a user thinks will make him/her appear 'cool'. Alternately, a meme stating: 'Proud to be a lesbian' can illustrate that a user is a homosexual and does not wish to hide their homosexuality.

Memes particularly add to a person's online identity when interpreted in conjunction with the rest of the Facebook profile; however, if the audience is exposed to an isolated meme through their news feed, for instance, it can be interpreted incorrectly. This means a user's online identity can be misinterpreted. Figure 4 provides an example of the way in which a meme can result in a misinterpretation of a user's online identity. It is a variation of the 'Keep calm and carry on' meme (Figure 5), but in this case the yellow poster depicts a piece of butter with the words 'Keep calm and add butter' below it. Interpreted in isolation it could merely represent the love for butter, but if read in conjunction with the appreciation of the film *Julie and Julia* (Director: Ephron, 2009) another understanding is possible. In the film the main character Julie believes that butter is the greatest food. The meme could also indicate the user is a chef or simply very passionate about cooking. If posted on someone's wall as an insult it could point to a comment on a weight problem. There are clearly numerous ways in which this meme can be interpreted. The meanings of memes are, therefore, dependent on the environment in which they appear, and in this case useful clues are provided in the rest of the person's Facebook profile or news feeds.



Figure 4: Unknown designer, Keep calm and add butter, undated.



Figure 5: Unknown designer, Keep calm and carry on, undated.

IDENTITY ON FACEBOOK: CREATING BACK AND FRONT STAGES

Identity is amongst other things constructed through inter-personal interactions and the social and physical environment. This indicates that identity is not fixed; rather one is constantly in a state of ‘being’ (who one is now) and ‘becoming’ (who one strives to become) (Jenkins 2004, 5). While a user may try to portray an ideal construction of the self while online, they are still dependent on the environment and the audience for the co-construction of their online identities. However, in most instances this performance is not viewed as a conscious act, and partly remains subconscious, based on the situation (environment and audience) (Kelley 2007, 4). In other words, although the performance of a specific aspect of identity may be deliberate, it is not entirely a conscious act (Kelley 2007, 4).

Facebook has become precisely such an online medium from where one’s identity can be staged, either consciously or subconsciously. When logging onto Facebook, a user is directed to their homepage, which features a news feed. From here, a user can visit their profile or the profile of any of their friends. They can also access friend requests, notifications, groups, and so on. A Facebook user is linked to others in numerous ways such as groups and online connections (Westlake 2008, 25). Also, by clicking on the name of a book, movie, or band one is redirected to a list of Facebook users who have listed that specific book or movie as one of their likes (Westlake 2008, 25). From the homepage, users can access private messages, Facebook Chat, as well as update their status. In this way, Facebook’s architecture enables the easy spread of memes.

The use of fuller profiles on social networking sites, such as Facebook, means that the experimentation of identity using online resources has become more complicated, as it is no longer merely a case of logging in with a false name or doing gender-swapping and perhaps lying about one's age.² The use of photographs, videos, posts, and comments means that it has become far more difficult to be untruthful about one's offline ('real') identity. As a result, users generally do not completely change their identity when using social networking sites; rather, they highlight certain qualities or falsify certain qualities through their online performance. Robinson (2007, 94) argues that the 'cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline self', namely through what one says, how one appears and what one likes. Just as users perform offline, so they perform online. The performance of identity is very important, as it needs to appear convincing to others.

According to Goffman (1969:19), the split between the performer's view of his/her own identity and the audience's interpretation of this identity is controlled by a split between a 'front stage' and a 'back stage'. The back stage is the area where the performer does not have to put on a show (as the performer is hidden from the audience), and the place from where performances are constructed (Goffman 1969, 97). It is, therefore, an area free from the direct interpretation of the audience or the influence of the environment. For Goffman (1969, 19), the front stage encompasses the 'setting', or the environment (context), in which the performance takes place. In most circumstances this setting already exists and the performer must adapt to this environment (Goffman 1969, 24). The setting can assist the performance by providing the user with tools. For example, on Facebook the user can use applications that assist with flirting or the comparing of tastes, as well as virtual gestures such as a 'poke'.

According to Robinson, the division of back stage and front stage is apparent on instant messaging platforms as multiple conversations allow for the creation of multiple front and back stage areas (2007, 107), disappearing from the front stage when online by choosing to appear offline. Also, it can be argued that using multiple social media platforms creates multiple front stage areas. For example, in the film *Catfish* (Directors: Joost & Schulman, 2010), Angela, the protagonist, creates multiple front stages as each of her 15 Facebook profiles represents different aspects of her identity. Goffman argues that a performer segregates their audience in order to perform different aspects of their identity (1969, 43).

The architecture of social media sites also influences the performance of online identity in several other ways (Marwick 2005:9). Firstly, the rigid profile structures of social media sites result in an online identity that is partly constructed by the user and partly structured by the site (Marwick 2005, 9; Kelley 2007, 12; Van Dijck 2013, 147). The architecture of social media sites also encourages the spread of memes. In this regard, the ‘share’ button on Facebook, as well as the ease with which one can create links to YouTube videos, actively assisting the spread of memes. One can share memes by adding posts, images and videos to someone else’s profile (Van Doorn 2010, 585). This shared content can be approved by clicking on the ‘like’ button, opinions can be provided by clicking on the ‘comment’ button, and also be disapproved by clicking on the ‘report this’ button (Enli & Thumin 2012:93). For example, a recent video uploaded onto a Facebook account showing three men being beaten by another man in a Fourways bar in Johannesburg has caused great outrage (Roane 2013, 1). As a result, the video was deleted from the Facebook account.

The reception of posts by an audience is consequently very important in the selection of what is shared and with whom. The reasons why someone would create fake public profiles (front stage areas), exaggerate certain aspects, or hide certain aspects of their identity online are because users tend to perform an idealised version of their identity, as opposed to their actual self (Goffman 1969, 30). In the film *Catfish* (Directors: Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela exaggerates her own attractiveness by uploading another person’s photographs and pretending it is her. Not surprisingly the Facebook Angela (Figure 6) can be considered more attractive than the offline Angela (Figure 7).



Figure 6: Angela’s Facebook profile, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.



Figure 7: Angela in real life, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

Similarly, Angela creates fake, exaggerated profiles by uploading photographs of attractive men and women, labelling these photographs as members of her family. On the other hand, the concealment of certain aspects of identity can be achieved by purposefully concealing

certain aspects of one's identity or by correcting errors in performance (Goffman 1969, 37). In this regard, Angela conceals parts of her identity in real life and performs these aspects on her numerous fake Facebook accounts. Angela states that she has missed out in her life and that she can no longer express all of her identity in her offline world. She has to take care of three children (two of the children require extreme attention), and this has resulted in her not regularly doing what she would like to be doing. For this reason, Angela becomes online friends with Nev, who reintroduces her to dance, which used to be an important part of her offline life. On one of her fake Facebook identities Angela becomes a dancer and is able to explore repressed aspects of her own identity. Therefore, Facebook allows Angela to express all of the facets of her identity that she struggles to express in real life. Angela's online construction as the dancer becomes inconsistent, causing others to start questioning her performance. For a performance to be believed by the audience, the performance must be coherent or continuous (Goffman 1969, 22). The audience of a nonymous social media site, such as Facebook, can point out irregularities in a user's performance, as most online connections know the user offline as well (Stokes 2011,13, Donath & Boyd 2004, 73).

Goffman warns that an audience can sometimes misinterpret the signs of a performance (1969:45), because the signs are performed in given (the expression that a user gives) and given off (the expression that a user gives off) ways (Goffman 1969, 2). 'Given' signs are those signs performed deliberately, while those signs 'given off' are unintended signs that a performer conveys. While users perform their identity online through carefully constructed signs to portray themselves in an idealised fashion, the latest research suggests that users online and offline identities are very similar (Back et al. 2010, 374). In other words, online identity is not an ideal version of the user's offline identity; rather, it is the same as the user's offline identity. While 'given' signs are carefully constructed, it is important to remember that signs 'given off' also contribute to the identity performed. As these signs 'given off' are not constructed, they are more likely to give a true impression of someone's identity. A Facebook profile can, therefore, be an accurate representation of a user's offline identity (which is also a performance), as the signs that are not constructed by the user give a true impression of their offline identity, regardless of the online, 'given' (constructed) identity. This idealised self (portrayed using 'given' signs) is performed on Facebook in several ways, namely through a user's likes, biography section, posts and photographs. Alternately, unconstructed signs could be conveyed through posts and photographs uploaded by others, some of a user's likes, or the memes a user shares.

When a user signs up to Facebook to create a personal profile, the user is asked to fill in their name, surname, email, gender and age. In this way, as a nonymous user, one re-embodies oneself in the predetermined identity boundaries that exist in the offline world. Madden et al found that 92% of teenagers use their real names, 71% of teenagers reveal their school name and where they live, 82% reveal their birth date, and 62% reveal their relationship status (2013, 3). While, Facebook users tend to use their real offline names when creating a Facebook profile, there are obviously numerous exceptions (Madden et al 2013, 30). The name and biographical section of one's Facebook profile contribute to one's initial online identity. The biography section's fields are filled in with the intention of presenting oneself in a very specific manner. It is natural for someone to want to be liked, be popular or influential, and the user's profile on Facebook is constructed in order to achieve these results. Kelley's interview with a Facebook user illustrates the ways in which the biographical section of a Facebook page can portray identity: if the user is a communist but 'communism' is not an option under political views. He, therefore, selects the 'other' option under political views; while referring to Carl Marx's ideas under the 'Activities', 'About Me' and 'Favourite Quotes' sections, and listing Marx's book *Kapital* as one of his favourite books. Lastly, he added a photograph of Vladimir Lenin in front of the Soviet flag (2007, 31). In this way, the user has managed to overcome some of the identity restrictions created by the architecture of Facebook.

A large part of the biography section of a Facebook profile consists of the user's tastes and likes. An online identity is created through all of the information that is uploaded onto a user's Facebook profile under their likes and interests section. After completing this aspect of one's profile, one is prompted to upload a profile picture and then invite all of the people one knows to be an online connection. After gaining connections, the user is prompted to add applications and groups to their profile. All of these factors are carefully considered; for example, Facebook users interviewed by Kelley realise that the groups they join on Facebook reflect their identity (2007, 36). Similarly, Facebook check-ins are carefully considered and only performed if the check-in will contribute to a user's overall desired identity, as other user's may form negative opinions dependent on the places a user visits (Wang & Stefanone 2013, 442).

A user's 'likes' does not only include their tastes and interests, but also the liking of other users' posts, comments and photographs. Facebook users can also click a like button on an external web page, and this activity is documented on their profile (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013, 5). These 'likes' also contribute to the user's online identity. According to Rachel Kaufman, Michal Kosinski, a psychometrician at the University of Cambridge, has developed an algorithm that accurately determines a user's personality through their Facebook likes (2013, 1). Users carefully evaluate what their 'likes' could contribute to their online identity and, therefore, only 'like' something on Facebook if it can add to their idealised identity. For example, Turkle's interview of a Facebook user confirms that he represents himself as cool and in the know on Facebook, while he is hesitant to reveal other parts as himself, such as his like of Harry Potter (2012,185). However, Kosinski's algorithm can also link a user and his likes to personality traits that are not immediately obvious to humans, illustrating that a user's 'likes' also contribute to the signs that are not constructed by the user (Kaufman 2013, 1). In an attempt to present themselves in an idealised manner, Madden et al found that 59% of teenage Facebook users have deleted or edited something they have posted, 53% deleted comments from others, 45% untagged themselves (removed their name) from photographs (2013, 63). However, 19% have posted status updates, comments or videos they regretted sharing (Madden et al 2013, 63).

POUTING FACES

When trying to determine someone's identity from their Facebook profile, photographs are most often relied on as accurate portrayals of that person's identity (Gershon 2011:886). Photographs provide accidental glimpses into someone's life, making these photographs less likely to be staged to present a certain persona other than the offline performance of that user (Gershon 2011, 886). Also, as the Facebook accounts of all users are continuously updated with new photographs and status updates, other users can repeatedly re-view someone's profile as it is always changing. While users can un-tag themselves in photographs or posts on Facebook, these photographs and posts are still viewable on the person's profile who originally published the item, as well as on the profiles of all the other people tagged in the published item. Un-tagging photographs also provides the other users with information about a person's identity, as other users know that this person has seen this photograph and is unhappy with the impression that this photograph creates in conjunction with the person's profile (Gershon 2011, 789). Some photographs uploaded by users involve a specific generic pose, and thus can be classified as memes.

One of these generic poses is the meme of the self-portrait or ‘selfie’³ that has resulted in numerous social media users posting self-portrait photographs. The selfie was originally known as ‘MySpace Angles’ as it originated on MySpace profiles (Sessions 2009, 2). According to Williams, these different self-portraits allow the photographer to explore different aspects of their identity, similar to the ways in which earlier generations experimented with identity through different outfits and hairstyles (2006, 2). Sessions (2009, 3) identifies three objections to selfies namely, users argue that those using self-portraits are conforming, and thereby losing their individuality; secondly, the use of self-portraits is viewed as ‘narcissistic’; and, lastly, these self-portraits allow the photographer to appear more attractive and slimmer than in real life (as the self-portrait obscures the rest of the body or is taken from a high angle). According to Sessions (2009, 4), there are a number of poses that are struck in these self-portraits, including ‘the kissy face’ (pouting), ‘the Asian’ (the forming of a peace sign gesture), and ‘the shocked pose’ (appearing surprised). All of these poses have become memes in their own right.

In addition, photographic memes also include numerous poses, such as pouting, which are replicated, or the embarrassing photographs taken of people when they are drunk. The uses of text-based status updates that have been copied, but slightly altered, are another example of memes. These text-based memes constantly appear in sections of the biographical section of a Facebook profile, such as the ‘About Me’ section or the ‘Favourite Quotes’ section, as well as in status updates and comments. Examples of memes as status updates may include such posts as: asking friends to like or share a status update or the changing of a word or answering of a questions before reposting the status update; asking users to comment if tagged on a status update; urging users to take action by saving rhinos or polar bears; and status updates that implore users to share if they know someone who has cancer or have a loving sister.

CONCLUSION

Facebook has become increasingly integrated into the lives of its users. The site is used for numerous reasons, including the performance of identity, maintenance of relationships, and self-branding. The performance of identity on Facebook consists of the user’s portrayal of identity, the Facebook environment (architecture) and the audience (online connections). A

Facebook identity is created through those signs that are constructed by the user to portray the user in a specific manner, and those signs that are unintentionally ‘given off’ (unconstructed signs). As the popularity and usage of Facebook increases, so does the spread of memes on Facebook profiles. It can be argued that while constructed signs (such as profile picture, biographical information, and ‘likes’) are communicated to add to the idealised identity of the user, not all unconstructed signs – such as memes – are (selfies are the exception), as memes are not always directly linked to one’s offline appearance or interests. For this reason, a user is less likely to consider the ways in which a meme could affect their online identity before posting a meme. However, this meme will still reveal an aspect of a user’s online and offline identity, as a user still selects memes to share according to their sense of humour, likes, gender, race, and so on. In other words, a user could share a meme hoping to add to their idealised identity or simply because they think that the meme is humorous, but the user cannot control the ultimate interpretation of the meme, and this interpretation adds to their identity.

Whether an Internet meme, a text-based meme or a photographic meme; these memes are interpreted by the audience, who deduce certain connotations from each meme. These memes are also interpreted in conjunction with the environment in which they are experienced by the audience, be this the rest of the user’s profile or someone else’s news feed. In this way, a meme shared on Facebook can, correctly or incorrectly, reveal a user’s likes, sexual orientation, race, and so on. It is, therefore, through these unconstructed signs that a user’s offline identity is revealed. It is not surprising then that studies comparing online and offline identities have found that one’s online and offline identities are the same or very similar (Back et al 2009, 2; Bachrach et al 2012, 1).

¹ Boyd and Marwick (2011, 7) define networked publics as ‘simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice’.

² A cyber-identity is created when a user constructs a persona that is projected into an online environment (Turkle 1999, 643). Identity play happens when some detail of an identity is changed when presented online, such as a name, location or gender (Turkle 1999, 643). However, the computer has not changed the identity of the user; rather, the computer allows the user to play with parts of their identity, as identity has always been fragmented and flexible (Turkle 1999, 643). Virtual reality allows users to experiment with specific aspects of their fragmented identity individually through the numerous windows on the computer screen, as each window represents an aspect of identity, and a whole identity encompasses all these windows (Turkle 1999, 644). When using social media, users achieve this fragmentation through the use of different social media sites. This altering

of different fragments of online and offline identities has become more seamless through the use of the smartphone. In this way, the invention of the smartphone has changed the relationship between the user and the computer (Turkle 2012, 161). The user is now, not only connected to an entire network of people; but rather, the user is always connected to an entire network of people. Turkle (2012, 161) argues that users are no longer 'cycling through' fragments of their identity through the use of windows; rather, they are ever-present in all fragments of their online and offline identities, and thus social identity has become a 'mashup' of all these different identities. In the film *Catfish* (Directors: Joost & Schulman 2010) the characters connect to each other using chat facilities, private sms's, social networking sites, emails, and so on. These methods of communication are all directly accessed from their smartphones or desktop applications, thus these characters are always connected and available. Also, people can have multiple emails, phone numbers and online profiles (Boyd 2001, 10). In this way, all fragmentations of one's identity can now be experienced simultaneously and continuously. As a result, memes spread using social media can be sent and received constantly.

³ A close-up picture taken of oneself at arm's length, specifically taken to be uploaded onto a social networking site.

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