

# How Do You Facebook? The Gendered Characteristics of Online Interaction

Nathalie N. Delise

## Introduction

Many social networking sites lost and gained popularity over the past decade, although Facebook continues to thrive. Facebook is a part of everyday discourse and highly salient to many people's social interactions and presentations of self. Due to its popularity, Facebook is an important place to study interaction especially since to date it is fairly under-explored within the social sciences. The purpose of this study is to examine how presentation and interaction on Facebook differs from face-to-face interaction and presentation. Specifically, the chapter will address gender similarities and differences.

Facebook has strong implications for our lives and livelihood. For example, admissions offices, hiring personnel, and lawyers use information that they find on individuals' Facebook profiles to either benefit or discredit them (Hamilton and Akbar 2010). Facebook is also a practical way for individuals to network and share job related information. Facebook is a common medium for socialization in general. People are able to keep in touch with one another (and the rest of their friends) through Facebook. This simple feature has major outcomes that are addressed in the background and findings. All of these highlight the importance of the presentation of self and the perception of one's identity on Facebook.

Facebook's popularity began when it swept across college campuses after creator Mark Zuckerberg first introduced the site in 2004. The distinctiveness that Facebook originally held was that users had to have a '.edu' email address; this college only appeal was what set Facebook apart from other major social networking sites at the time such as Myspace and Friendster. Facebook grew rapidly after repealing

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This chapter is an adaptation from a larger work, "Me, Myself, & Identity Online: Identity Salience on Facebook vs. Non-Virtual Identity" (2012).

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N. N. Delise (✉)  
Department of Sociology, Gender & Popular Culture,  
University of New Orleans, New Orleans, USA  
e-mail: nndelise@gmail.com

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the condition of requiring a ‘.edu’ email address. The site first opened to high school students in September 2005, and then to the general public in September of 2006.

Today there are over 800 million active Facebook accounts worldwide; and over 50% of these users log in each day (Facebook 2011). Every single one of these accounts may not represent an “actual” person, but this is still an important feature in regards to this research (i.e. difference in interaction, and control over presentation). For example, pets, Santa Claus, and deceased Presidents have Facebook profiles; some individuals maintain multiple personal profiles as well. There are more than 350 million active users currently accessing Facebook through their mobile devices; more than 475 mobile operators globally working to deploy and promote Facebook mobile products; and more than 7 million apps and websites are integrated with Facebook. More than 2 billion posts are liked and commented on per day, and on average, more than 250 million photos are uploaded per day (Facebook 2011). These numbers show how prevalent presenting ourselves on Facebook is in society today.

At this stage in the research social networking sites are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Papacharissi 2009, p. 201). The definition of Facebook according to Facebook (2011) is:

Facebook, the product, is made up of core site functions and applications. Fundamental features to the experience on Facebook are a person’s Home page and Profile. The Home page includes News Feed, a personalized feed of his or her friends updates. The Profile displays information about the individual he or she has chosen to share, including interests, education and work background and contact information. Facebook also includes core applications—Photos, Events, Videos, Groups, and Pages—that let people connect and share in rich and engaging ways. Additionally, people can communicate with one another through Chat, personal messages, Wall posts, Pokes, or Status Updates. (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>)

Facebook is designed to connect people through a virtual network of “friends”. In doing so, each member participates in the presentation of self virtually—through profile creation, maintenance, and exchanges of content.

## Background

This study takes a Symbolic Interactionist approach and primarily draws on Self and Identity theories, including Dramaturgical theory, Identity theory, and Social Identity theory. Context and reflexivity are fundamental features of these theories. Context refers to the time, location, and audience (i.e. who, what, when, where). Reflexivity is simply a back and forth process that occurs during social interactions—an actor projects an impression for an audience, the audience interprets that projection and responds accordingly, the actor interprets the feedback and then internalizes it. Hence, the actor is both the subject and object of his or her interactions.

The virtual setting of presentation and identity projection on Facebook is similar yet distinct from face-to-face interactions. According to Paik and Zerilli (2003), face-to-face interaction is the medium through which people physically enact their social roles, therefore the authority offered by a person's role only exists when it is applied in the presence of others. For example, male/female are not only identities, but sex role categories that must be enacted through physical interaction to become real and legitimate (Paik and Zerilli 2003). The lack of face-to-face interaction through social networking sites, however, challenges this view point. Therefore, such media initiates a new playing field for analyzing behavior and the presentation of self.

### ***Facebook as Location***

Goffman (1959) noted that sometimes the presentation of self, or performance, is directed at the location rather than the audience alone. For instance, when one goes to court there are certain guidelines that one follows because s/he is in a courtroom; the main factor guiding behavior is the location or setting. Similarly, Facebook is a location for presentation which guides behavior; users may be acting in certain ways for Facebook 'appropriateness', not necessarily for specific audience members.

According to Papacharissi (2009, p. 215), Facebook is "the architectural equivalent of a glass house, with a publicly open structure which may be manipulated (relatively, at this point) from within to create more or less private spaces". The merging of private and public boundaries on Facebook brings about behavioral consequences for those who must adjust their behavior to make it appropriate for a variety of different situations and audiences (Papacharissi 2009). Thus, people must adjust their behavior for Facebook specifically.

The setting of online interaction is a distanced front stage performance in comparison to interacting in person or face-to-face. Currently there are two primary trends in the research: Facebook enables the creation of an ideal or enhanced self (Bargh et al. 2002; Christofides et al. 2009; Farrell 2006; Gonzales and Hancock 2011; Marshall 2010; Mehdizadeh 2010; Papacharissi 2002, 2009; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008; Wise et al. 2010) and people enact greater levels of disclosure on Facebook (Papacharissi 2009; Christofides et al. 2009; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008; Mazer et al. 2007). In addition, Hinduja and Patchin (2007) found that it is easier to share information online compared to face-to-face interactions.

### ***Usage***

Prior research shows that there are differences in the way men and women use social networking sites such as Facebook. First, Armentor-Cota (2011) claims that men and women communicate using different language styles online. Pascoe (2011)

noted that young men like using social networking sites to interact with prospective dates because it is easier to talk to them there. Some researchers claim that the majority of people use Facebook to keep in touch with those whom they already know (Kujath 2011; Papacharissi 2009); although Tufekci (2008) found that men are more likely to branch out and meet new people through Facebook, while women are more inclined to interact with those whom they already know. Despite these differences, there are control facets that similarly affect men and women.

## ***Control***

On Facebook, individuals show rather than tell others about themselves, indirectly defining themselves through content (Christofides et al. 2009; Desmarais et al. 2009; Mehdizadeh 2010). Facebook users may manipulate identities depending on information that they decide to post or put forward. This includes: profile pictures, album pictures, status updates, wall posts, comments, and personal information such as name, birthday, school, relationship status, email address, favorite movies, favorite bands, favorite quotes, interests and the like. Users also have the ability to “tag” or “untag” themselves in others’ content; tagging refers to attaching a link from the information to one’s personal page. Thus, identities emerge via front stage projections as a result of selective self presentation (Gonzales and Hancock 2011).

While both men and women selectively self present information online, they do it in different ways. Women are more likely than men to use a nickname, pseudonym, or false name online (Armentor-Cota 2011). Men are associated with self promoting descriptions in the “about me” section and women self promote through pictures (Mehdizadeh 2010). This is not surprising considering gender stereotypes; women’s looks are associated with being their most salient identity characteristic, and status through education, career, humor, and the like are salient identity characteristics of men. Remember that roles influence one’s identity and behavior (i.e. gender roles).

According to Armentor-Cota (2011) gender identity is neutralized in some co-ed online settings, yet traditional gender norms are also reproduced online. This is blatant through pictures, posts, and comments where males enter a masculine discourse framing women as sexual objects on profiles (Pascoe 2011). The males display certain items to project a masculine image that they know will be viewed by others.

Although the individual is central on Facebook, people still expect to interact with others. Exchanges create content as well as individuals (Dalsgaard 2008; Marshall 2010; Papacharissi 2009; Wise et al. 2010; Mazer et al. 2007). According to Papacharissi (2009), inferences about one’s tastes, social habits and character can be made based on the company one keeps. Thus, what your friends post on your page reflects back on you. Who one’s friends are, as well how many friends one has, is tied to identity projection on Facebook. The display of friends on Facebook can also be seen as a public display of connection (Tufekci 2008).

## *Display of Identity*

Social identities are displayed through taste in clothing, music, literature, sports and the like; each are associated with certain forms of cultural capital that distinguish identities (Bettie 2003; Pierre Bourdieu 1978; Dalsgaard 2008). Educational attainment, occupation, class and prestige compile one's socioeconomic status, which is also displayed through impression management. One cultural difference in class is signified by the use of nonstandard grammar or speech (Bettie 2003; Bourdieu 1978). Gender and class identity intersect through style, fashion, and make-up; these features are perceived to be central to a girl's identity, but all girls do not have the same access to trendy/expensive products (Bettie 2003). This speaks to both what it means to be feminine and of a particular class.

Femininity is marked by wearing make-up, dresses, tight clothing, and being non-athletic with the exception of cheerleading; where as masculinity is marked by athleticism, rowdiness, leadership, and heterosexuality (Pascoe 2007). Masculinity was also projected through attire: athletic shorts, ties, and men's button down shirts (Pascoe 2007). Pascoe's (2007) work also points to the intersection of performing gender and sexuality when she discusses teenaged girls that "act like boys"; these girls are athletic, outspoken, and predominantly lesbian.

Bettie (2003) discusses how race, class and masculinity intersect. She mentions a magazine chapter about white boys performing "black" identities because they were wearing hip-hop styled clothing, as well as a group of young black boys that were performing a "white" identity because they appeared as though they "walked out of Eddie Bauer" (Bettie 2003, p. 47). In this scenario one's racial identity is being interpreted through clothing, just one aspect of performance. However, this is actually a sign of class, not only race; Eddie Bauer signifies middle-class whiteness, not working-class. The students who/were identified as the rockers and smokers were white, working class kids who wore mainly dark clothing (Bettie 2003). This reference to displaying a certain image through clothing speaks to the relationship between projection and perception.

## **Methods**

As part of a larger study that sought to explore the congruencies and incongruences in presentational behavior, in person compared to on Facebook, this chapter focuses on gendered aspects of interaction in relation to identity maintenance and perception. The particular questions of interest reflect how the research is primarily exploratory. One, how does interaction differ on Facebook compared to face-to-face? Is there a difference between identity projection in person and identity projection on Facebook? Which identities are most salient on Facebook compared to saliency during a face-to-face interaction? Finally, what features are similar or different among the genders?

The data was gained through content analyses of personal Facebook profiles, followed by semi-structured face-to-face interviews, observations, and a Twenty Statements Test (ASANET.org 2008). Content on Facebook profiles reflect front stage behavior (e.g. comments, posts, and the like), and the emergent identities can be viewed as the outcome of presentational behavior. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gain backstage access to participant's Facebook self. The non-virtual self is backstage of Facebook but is still a front stage presentation, or a face-to-face front. Theoretically, the Twenty Statements Test responses are the best reflection of backstage information.

Participants were twenty (20) individuals, in the New Orleans area, who have a personal Facebook page. Participants were not chosen if they belonged to my personal "friends" list. There are fifteen (15) females and five (5) males from various racial backgrounds. Their ages range from 18 to 42 years with the average being 25.2 years of age. The average number of years spent on Facebook is 4.1 years; the average is slightly higher for females compared to males, 4.3 years versus 3.6 years. The following themes discussed reflect how the emergent data overlaps and connects.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Comparison of Salient Identities: Twenty Statements Test Cross-Comparisons***

In general, less than a third of the TST identities aligned with the participant's front stage and backstage projections combined across gender. This displays how people reserve a portion of themselves and only share/project certain information. Women and men project some congruent qualities across the board, but also project different identities according to context (i.e. only on Facebook, only in person, neither). Some participants displayed more of their TST identities on Facebook, where as others project more of their TST identities (or salient identities) in person. This mixed finding is consistent across gender.

### ***Identity Projection***

Participants are more eclectic and project a more diverse collection of identities on Facebook compared to their non-virtual selves. Many women and men display their employment and religious affiliations on Facebook but did not mention either backstage. Individual talents were also represented on Facebook over and over again, while these same identities were not made apparent in person; for example, singer, drummer, cook, seamstress, actor, writer and the like. This assortment of identities reflects the postmodern self, where you can pick and choose a variety of identities

to project in different contexts. This finding aligns with current research in that the postmodern identity is fluid, especially during online interactions (Armentor-Cota 2011).

Overall, participants' racial identities were congruent while their gender identities were slightly different. All males identified themselves as men during the interview, which aligned with their appearance on Facebook. One participant identified as queer during the interview, but appeared more womanly than androgynous on Facebook. The remaining females identified themselves as women, and their Facebook data was synonymous. Gender was also measured by recording masculine, feminine, or gender neutral identities. Collectively, males were more gender neutral on Facebook when compared to their backstage, face-to-face selves/identities. It is notable that female participants appeared more feminine on Facebook compared to their non-virtual self. Armentor-Cota (2011) also found that one's gender identity online doesn't necessarily reflect one's offline identity/self.

Additionally, multiple women projected a difference in their name via front stage. Married women tended to use only their married last name in person, while including their maiden name on Facebook. It is possibly easier to retain the connection with one's maiden name via Facebook, or easier to state only one name in person. Identifying and displaying both the maiden name and married name may be necessary for Facebook in particular. For instance, people that do not know one's married last name can still search for her through the maiden name (if listed of course). Other women displayed different first and/or last names. This could represent a different identity online or it could signify private and extra cautious characteristics. Either way, women are more likely than men to present a difference in their name online.

More than half of participants did not list their birth year on Facebook; although only one male contributed to this category. In turn, one's identity attached to their age is not displayed. It is not surprising that this is mainly a feature among women where age can be stigmatic. Due to retaining this information backstage, many women seemed younger and more youthful on Facebook. This is not only reflected through physical appearances in pictures but through other content as well, such as the "Lion King" listed as a favorite movie signifies a youthful identity for example. Past research also shows that men and women frequently lie about age and body image online (Agger 2012).

When it comes to physical appearance, there were numerous incongruences in display. Some participants appeared taller, some shorter, some heavier, or slimmer on Facebook compared to their backstage appearance (in person). Despite gender, multiple participants displayed "prettier" or "better looking" versions of themselves on Facebook versus in person. Some were more "put together" on Facebook compared to a messy, sloppy, or frumpy appearance face-to-face; with the exception of one individual who seemed more sophisticated in person. One way to look at this would be a consistently 'good' version of the self is on Facebook, and inconsistencies reside backstage.

Moreover, women do not want unflattering photos of themselves on Facebook. Only women outright admitted to controlling their body image on Facebook through

pictures. Meaning the front stage impression is maintained by keeping (existing) unflattering pictures backstage. For example, only posting pictures “from the chest up” or “no uglies”; these females expressed not posting ugly pictures of themselves, and concerns over others’ posting this sort of image of them as well.

me “ok. um, what are your concerns with Facebook, if any?”

P8 “um, [pause] I think the only one is that people occasionally post really ugly pictures of me, [light chuckle] I think that’s just about it.”

If others do post “ugly” or unflattering pictures, the solution is simple according to P3, “I would delete it or untag it” and P12, “I would delete it or untag it, unless it’s *really* funny”. Ugly pictures are seen and discussed in a negative light because society both admires and rewards physical beauty. Ugly pictures threaten this avenue for a positive, approval worthy front stage image on Facebook for women. In the case of the funny picture, no matter how ugly, it still reflects a happy, likable, approachable and socially positive identity.

Furthermore, it is not such a surprise that this is a female response/behavior. Physical appearance is held at a higher standard for women, thus both the maintenance and perception of beauty is usually more important to women. Due to this, the disturbance of a positive beauty image is more destructive to women’s impressions and social value compared to men. On the most basic level women did not want ugly pictures of themselves on Facebook because they want to put forward their best face possible. On a more abstract level, ugly pictures threaten perceived femininity and may interfere with a possible source of power or status, or an identity standard at the least.

The projection of class status was also slightly incongruent, in that men and women displayed more elevated status symbols via front stage (on Facebook) compared to backstage (face-to-face). Many participants expressed a difference in their educational status in person compared to on Facebook. The majority of this group tended to be men with no educational information listed on Facebook, and they admitted to having little or no college education during the face-to-face interview. This means that their educational status is not important to them, or that it does not function to bolster one’s image on Facebook. One woman increased her level of educational attainment on Facebook (e.g. college senior in person and graduate student on Facebook), and another woman de-emphasized her level of prestige in person (e.g. did not project Ivy League affiliation in person, but was listed on Facebook). This is putting forward the “best” face front stage by displaying socially valuable qualities that may not be easily expressed in person.

Another theme that emerged from the data is maintaining an interesting impression front stage (i.e. not boring). Similarly, men and women stated that they try to post their own interests or “things” that others might find interesting such as humor, music, art and the like.

me “What do you try to post about?”

P14 “... or um if there’s a quote or a lyric something sometimes that I like an I wanna share or like a video ya know just stuff that I wanna share, pretty much.”



- P17 “um mostly I, I try an keep it as non-cliché as possible because the cliché posts kinda make me nauseated...”
- P6 “Um, [slight pause] I think it’s just stuff that kinda goes on through the day that I think other people might find interestin’ or might find humorous.”

Being funny or humorous was the most exaggerated front stage identity characteristic. The majority of men and women displayed humorous, funny, comical, silly, or witty content on their Facebook profiles. While backstage, most participants spoke about being witty or displaying humorous material as well, but they were not funny or witty. The funniest participant in person happened to appear more bland on Facebook in comparison. This shows how humor and wit are easier to portray on Facebook for most men and women. This is also evidence that wit and humor are valued identities on Facebook among the genders. Being funny is entertaining, i.e. not boring.

Many participants, despite gender, seemed happy on Facebook while this was incongruent with their face-to-face (backstage) projections/presentation. In addition, those who were happy in person still provided signs of emphasizing happiness on Facebook. For instance, P5 directly states “do[ing] happy things” while avoiding “negative things”; and P2 stated not posting about his/her personal life “cuz um I don’t need anyone to {ta} see how depressing that is.” Descriptions of what participants do not post, i.e. descriptions of backstage behavior, contribute to the identities that are projected on Facebook.

The majority of men and women were identified as sociable, outgoing, fun loving, supportive, helpful, thankful, giving, family oriented and friendly based on their front stage impression. This finding aligns with past research on “likable” personality traits. Wortman and Wood (2011) found that people who identify with communal, or other oriented, traits are highly liked by their peers. This is not surprising that these characteristics are emphasized on Facebook, being that Facebook is a *social* networking site. What is interesting is that most men and women expressed these identities on Facebook but were not identified as so in person (backstage). Those who are friendly face-to-face are even friendlier on Facebook, and the same goes for family recognition (discussed below). This means that these identities are characteristic of the expected norm on Facebook.

### ***Facebook as Location (for Front Stage Projections)***

For most people, Facebook is a location where various groups of acquaintances, friends, family, and/or strangers come together to view an individual’s presentation of self at all times. Due to this users tailor their behavior to accommodate any possible audience member; this behavior is specific to Facebook because this is the only place where all of these people will be “together” at once (viewing and interpreting one’s identity projection).

The average number of Facebook friends is 388 within a range of 86 to 1098. Women have a slightly higher number of friends on average compared to men;

404 for women and 339 for men. The number of Facebook friends signifies public displays of connection and a mass audience.

### *Connectivity and Belonging*

Multiple women expressed that they are active members of one or more Facebook groups. This is not very shocking because Facebook is supposed to facilitate networking and information exchange for groups of people. However, it is interesting that this was solely a female feature; possibly because women are socialized to maintain interdependence through groups. Belonging to a Facebook group, or page, directly signifies a sense connectivity and belonging; and this in-group association is an important identity for said individuals.

Friends and family were featured in a mass amount of content on Facebook profiles, as well as mentioned throughout the interviews in different contexts. Overall, there are more direct references to family on Facebook than in person across gender. This not only highlights how family ties are important, but also how the display of relations is linked to connectivity and belonging via Facebook. Both men and women had posts about friends and family on their profiles, yet mainly women discussed posting about their family during interviews. Women referred to posting about their children/grandchildren in particular. Depending on context, this can reflect an adult, parent/grandparent, proud, responsible, caring, loving, family oriented, and/or youthful identity (among others). In this respect posting about family is not seen as too personal or private, it is framed as approvable information to share.

me “and um, What do you post about the most?”

P10 “ooh haha about how my kids doin, generally things like that, oh Randy did this and Randy did that ya know.”

Posting about one's friends displays that one is a friend, friendly, social, sociable, likable, and/or popular which are all socially positive characteristics. Although men and women compose posts for and about their friends, only women discussed the necessity to wish others happy birthdays regularly. Men and women are equally likely to claim that they comment on others' pages rather than their own, although this was a minority among the rest. More evidence of connections the better, especially because Facebook is a social networking site.

In general, participants mostly interact with their close friends, best friends, or family on Facebook. P10 explained the logic behind it best “...it's langiappe...it's like an extension of who I see anyway...” Langiappe is a local New Orleans term that means just a little extra, like a bonus. Once again this aligns with previous findings that people use Facebook to keep in touch with those whom they already know (Kujath 2011; Papacharissi 2009). Of the exception, men are more likely than women to mainly interact with acquaintances; for example, “acquaintances... because I can always call my best friends...” and “whoever's on my newsfeed”.

Illuminating How Identities, Stereotypes and  
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