

Personal Representation in Social Networks: A Discussion of Hyperreality in Facebook

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When someone pays up to £200 for a Ralph Lauren jumper while there are jumpers of similar quality for £50, it is obvious that the majority of the money paid is not for the jumper itself, but for what that jumper means and the statements that it will make about the wearer. The person might hope that the jumper will give him the impression of being fashionable, sporty, or just plain rich. In effect, whatever the desired implications, the material object – the wool and the threading – is replaced by what the jumper represents. This is known as hyperreality and, in a consumerist world full of symbols and brands, it is found in all developed societies. It has reached the point where the statements and ideas behind an object often become more important than the original object itself, and in a sense, replace it. However, in the same way that pornography is sexier than the sex it attempts to represent, is it possible that your Facebook Profile is more you than you are?

Facebook has now become as big a part of student existence as being poor and eating pasta. In fact, the social networking site was named by a recent student survey as the second most "in" thing among undergraduates, tied with beer and losing only to the iPod. However, what sacrifice must we make in order to integrate ourselves with this social network? The first thing you do when you sign up is strip yourself down to your core information: your religious views, political alignment, gender, sexual preferences, relationship status, age, hometown and profession. You are literally required to digitally condense yourself into a few lines of text, being asked many questions that wouldn't even be permitted in a job interview.

If the first step could be described as sketching your basic outline of your digital portrait, the second could be described as adding the colour. Then you are asked to selectively insert splashes of your personality through

listing your favourite books, films and music in addition to your activities and interests. The point is to sum up the person, and while these fragments might give the viewer an idea of the type of person who created the Profile, they are obviously nowhere near sufficient to its real author. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the wasted potential of the bizarrely named 'About Me' section; the average amount of text written is two lines and can range between anything from "I'm friendly and like meeting new people" to "I'm scared of the dark."

The point is clear: you are not supposed to recreate yourself on Facebook, but instead create something that is representative of you and through which you hope that people will deduce who you are – although, perhaps not even that is certain. Some people might, instead of creating an accurate depiction of themselves, create a representation of how they would like to be seen by the people who view their Profile, or even of who they would like to be. People attach qualities to themselves through the material they chose to share in their Profile in the same way brands and products do through advertisements.

Perhaps the most obvious way of doing this is through choosing a picture to associate with your Profile. Your name and online identity will, over time, become more and more represented by the one image you select as you interact within Facebook's social jungle. It appears consistently next to a description of your activities, repeatedly connecting what you're doing to your image. Even in order to access someone's Profile or to attempt to befriend someone you generally have to go through the process of finding and clicking on their picture. As you become familiarized with the person's Profile, you only need to notice their picture to remind you of who that person is, and so the picture begins to replace the Profile. As we've already established that, on Facebook, the person is represented by their Profile, the original person can eventually be portrayed a single JPEG.

If this picture were always an accurate representation of the original, this would make sense within the context of a social networking site. However, often this is not the case. In Facebook, when you are asked to upload a photo of yourself, you do not in fact upload a photo that is the most representative of how you look physically – as might seem to be the point in uploading an image of yourself – there are other motives. Firstly, it is very rare to upload a 'bad' picture of yourself – it is natural to want people to see you at your best! However, it is not only the physical qualities that mat-

ter; from your Profile you want people to deduce not only what you look like, but something about you as a person. You can only choose one photo at a time to represent yourself in this way and due to the importance of its role, the need to package a statement behind it becomes even more apparent. Through the symbols they contain, almost every Profile Picture conveys an implicit statement such as 'I care about my friends,' or 'I do interesting things in my holidays.' Facebook thus forces us to attach more importance to what our photo represents than to the photo itself, but, could it not reach the stage where statements made by your Profile might in some way outweigh the significance of the original on which it's based?

As we spend more time in the role of oversimplified and discerning Profile we have created, we become more immersed in our character. We begin to live through our Profile as an actor acts a role, or like someone playing as a character in a videogame. We reaffirm this fantasy through Facebook's activities and actions, the vast majority of which mimic real life. In the average twenty minute stint, we are able to give and receive virtual gifts which appear as a collection on our Profile. It is possible to join other groups of people with whom we share similar interests and beliefs of practically any type, with Group titles ranging from "Oh shit, Bush won again" to the "Asians with non-Asian last name club". There is even the option to become involved with someone by setting your Relationship Status to 'Married to' or 'It's complicated with' another user. This is now considered by many to be synonymous with couples making their sentiments public. As we repeatedly engage in these pseudo-actions and are reminded of the similar engagements of others through constantly updated news feeds, we step into a digital microcosm of our actual lives. As so many of these actions are directly related to the real world, like seeing images of events friends have attended for example, it becomes easy to blur the line between existing normally, and existing through your Profile. It is at this point that your Facebook existence becomes hyperreal and that you begin to wear the self-made mask that you use while acting through your Profile in real life.

However, there are some examples where efforts have been made to try to keep elements of real life and their Facebook versions separate. A large part of Facebook involves the system of Friends, where users must request your permission to be your Friend to access your Profile and other information. Most people are generally quite liberal with whom they allow to become their friend: it is commonplace to allow not only genuine friends to

become your 'Friends,' but, for the most part, almost anyone you know. This devalues the idea of the 'Friend' on Facebook and so people have interestingly coined the diminutive term 'Facebook Friend' to describe the growing army of associates who have become digitally connected to them, but with many of whom they will never interact. This is perhaps a small example of where Facebook's idea of friend has developed too dissimilarly to the original and people have felt the need to differentiate it accordingly.

An important point to make with regard to how Facebook alters reality is its treatment of direct communication between Friends. Textual communications will always lead to slightly ambivalent interpretations which differ from the meaning originally assigned by the writer, but Facebook succeeds in further convoluting the act of communicating through written words.

If you want to write something to someone, the primary and default way of doing this is by leaving a post on their virtual 'wall' which appears on their Profile page. It is perhaps the second most important aspect of somebody's Facebook life (after the Profile-picture) as it sums up the people who choose to communicate with you. When you write something on someone's Profile, your message can be viewed not just by that person, but by anyone visiting that person's Profile and its content will obviously be altered accordingly. For example, someone might make more of an effort to be witty or entertaining while removing sensitive or personal material. There is surely a need to do this as it is even also possible for someone to access the entire set of correspondence between two people (provided that they are Friends with both of them) by clicking on the appropriate link. Due to this, one-on-one communication has effectively been destroyed by Facebook. In fact, it becomes not so much communicating as broadcasting. In the true nature of hyperreality, the act of writing something to somebody becomes obscured by the public displays that Facebook's primary means of communicating forces us to make.

There is a second messaging option which works a lot like email, with a private inbox, but as the wall so prominently appears on your Profile, it has very much been made standard, perhaps even to the point where choosing to send a message (without an obvious reason for choosing this format) has its own connotations such as being secretive or suggesting a level of intimacy. In most cases, the same paragraph would not mean the same posted on somebody's Wall as it would in their Inbox. Furthermore, the second means gives people the ability to separate the entirety of their correspondence distinctly

into that which can be public and that which is not. The general result is that interactions become selective, removing material that would be detrimental to the writer or the recipient. As people spend more time speaking the language of the Facebook wall, it is possible that even the relationship – that are constantly being viewed and judged by others – will become oversimplified niceties of their real versions.

An extremely basic example would be if a couple were interacting over Facebook using both the public wall method and the private messaging method. They might send each generic updates about their daily goings on publically as a means of signalling to their friends that they are in a happy relationship, but if they were to argue, it would, were it conducted on Facebook, always be through the medium of private messages. The result would be that the correspondence between them is censored to the outside world such that their ‘relationship’ takes on a false degree of reality to the people who visit their pages, and perhaps eventually even to them. As a result of the pressures of constant social judgement, people’s Facebook relationships with one another are often conducted on a hyperreal plane, trapped within a Disneyland of empty niceties. This situation becomes hyperreal when a certain degree of belief is given to these pseudo-relationships.

Perhaps the most bizarre form of communication that Facebook provides us with is the electronic ‘Poke.’ You are simply given the option of whether you want to ‘Poke Someone’ (friend or not!), and when the message “You have been poked by ...” appears on our home page, it is up to you to flattered, offended or just plain violated. The only way that Facebook’s ‘Poking’ really exists is by the site sending you the generic single line of text telling you it has happened, however this reality is completely dwarfed by the meaning and connotations that we assign to it. Common interpretations of poking include an expression of a desire to have a chat with someone, or to keep in touch with minimal effort. However, the 370,000 strong Facebook group “Enough with the Poking, Let’s just have Sex” suggests that Poking’s connotations have come to a more specific conclusion (the overwhelming majority of Pokes do go to members of the opposite sex!). Whatever the meaning people associate with Poking, it remains associated with something that was created *ex nihilo* and is one of the most hyperreal forms of communication Facebook gives us.

To conclude, you only need to look at the mechanics of the site to see that acting through a Profile can become hyperreal. In entering Facebook, we

Hyperreality in Facebook

first digitally reduce ourselves to a few lines of coding, creating a digital skeleton of our most fundamental properties (name, age, sexuality etc.). Then a subjective montage of our personality that defines how we would like to be seen is made through our Profile Picture, information about what we enjoy and the Friends we surround ourselves with. Once the identity is adequately established, we fall further into the role we have chosen for ourselves by engaging in various digital activities. The more effort we put into this process, the more comfortable the self-made mask becomes and, eventually, the more real it begins to feel. The pseudo-actions Facebook offers such as making Friends, Attending Events and Chatting mimic their real life counterparts, and despite the fact that they are performed in an unreal context, their connection to real life encourage us to put more belief into our online persona. We are further tricked into believing in this falseness by the fact that we are interacting with the Profiles of other real people who are themselves inhabitants of this online world. By bombarding us with vast amounts of exciting information about real events and real people, Facebook tricks us into using it as a better and more vibrant replacement of the reality it represents. As new generations become increasingly comfortable with digital existence and communication, the idea that it is possible for someone to relate to his or her Facebook Profile more than he or she does to has become a reality.